

the encyclopedia of loops

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the encyclopedia of loops

by [LuckyMagicBelle](#)

Summary

Loops that have multiple sections from *on temporizing*, compiled in chronological order so you don't have to constantly go back to check on what happened in the previous parts of that loop. Check the chapter index for the title of your loop to find it. Also includes TLDRs for people who don't want to reread everything.

If you haven't read *on temporizing*, this won't make sense to you.

Notes

Many thanks to Whyam_Here for giving me the idea to make this!

cosplay competition (complete)

Chapter Summary

TLDR: Dream and Tommy have a cosplay competition and randomly dress up as their friends, much to the confusion of everyone else.

8. *cosplay competition, pt. 1 (credit to Mixy_ttwara)*

“What the fuck are you wearing?” Wilbur demanded. Tommy blinked and looked down at himself, then back up at Wilbur.

“. . . what I usually wear?”

The four other revolutionaries stared blankly at him. Tommy glanced down again. He was wearing his usual L’Manberg uniform, why did everyone look so confused?

Ah, it was probably because of the brown wig and sunglasses. And the white contacts. He was cosplaying Eret, after all.

“Uh.” Tubbo shuffled awkwardly. “Why. . . why is your hair brown?”

Tommy blinked. “It’s always like that. . .? Why are you all actin’ so weird?”

“Uh.” Wilbur exchanged glances with the others. “Nevermind.”

“If you win, you can have independence.” Dream crossed his arms. “If you lose, you don’t get independence. . . and I get Mellohi.”

Tommy bit his lip. “The disc,” he muttered, then made a show of turning back to L’Manberg and staring contemplatively at it. At this point, the discs weren’t worth much to him anymore-- but they were sticking to the script this loop, and he needed to act like they were the most important things in his life.

(Prime, he’d been such a *jerk*--)

He inhaled sharply and shoved those thoughts aside. “Deal,” he snapped.

“Okay,” Dream said mildly. He promptly turned and walked away, off to reconvene with his team.

“Alright, I need a bow,” Tommy said, turning to the revolutionaries. Tubbo and Fundy began rifling through their inventories.

“It’s sundown,” Wilbur remarked. He stared up at the sky, deep in thought. “. . . Ten paces. I’ll count it off.”

“No armor, Dream!” Tommy called.

Dream gave an acknowledging wave and moved over to a chest. “Make sure nobody takes anything,” he said to Sapnap as he pulled off his netherite helmet.

Everyone froze.

“Uh,” Fundy said intelligently.

Dream turned to them. The fake fox ears adorning his head were slightly squished. He brushed a hand over them and they sprung up again.

“. . . Dream?” George asked. Dream glanced at him. “. . . why are you wearing fox ears?”

“Because,” Dream said, and didn’t give any more explanation. Everyone collectively decided to ignore it, though Wilbur stuttered mid-speech when Dream removed the rest of his armor to reveal that he had a *fox tail* pinned to the back of his pants. Thankfully, things proceeded fairly smoothly after that. In a matter of minutes, Tommy and Dream were standing on opposite ends of the path, readying their bows.

“Okay,” Sapnap said before Wilbur could start counting. “Is nobody going to question why Tommy is dressed up like Eret?”

“Or why Dream has *fox ears*? ” Fundy blurted, sounding slightly hysterical.

“Wait, he’s dressed up like *me*? ” Eret asked.

Sapnap stared blankly at him, then gestured at Tommy. “Uh. Sunglasses? Brown hair? I’m pretty sure that’s a wig, actually. It looks like your hairstyle.”

Eret glanced back and forth between Tommy and Dream, seemingly at a loss for words.

Dream cleared his throat impatiently. “Are we starting or not?”

Sapnap narrowed his eyes. “You--”

“OKAY,” Wilbur interrupted, because he frankly did *not* want to know. “I’M GOING TO START COUNTING NOW. ONE--”

“Zero out of ten. Your cosplay fucking *sucked*. ”

“Excuse you? It was better than yours!”

“Says who?!”

“Eret didn’t even realize you were cosplaying him!”

“At least Sapnap did! *Nobody* knew you were cosplaying Fundy!”

“I’m pretty sure Fundy knew, he just didn’t want to say it.”

“. . . Nah, your cosplay was just bad.”

“Excuse you--”

“You are *excused*! ”

“Zero out of ten for you too, you gremlin child--”

“You’re just mad that you lost!”

“I am *not*-- wait, are you wearing contacts?”

“Yeah! Got’em for Halloween a couple years back.”

“. . . *Fine*, one out of ten. But only because of the contacts.”

“YES! FIRST ROUND GOES TO ME, BITCH!”

18. *cosplay competition, pt. 2*

“Dream?” George rubbed his eyes, wondering if he was hallucinating.

“George,” Dream greeted, looking up from the sword he was sharpening. He was wearing a near-perfect copy of George’s outfit, save for the fact that the clout goggles were somehow balanced precariously over his customary smiley mask.

“Dream, is that-- is that *my* shirt?” George stalked closer, grabbing the sleeve of Dream’s blue tee and inspecting it. Dream jerked it away, clapping a protective hand over his arm.

“No,” he lied. Okay, so *maybe* he had stolen one of George’s shirts, and then tailored it to fit him. He had a cosplay competition to win, after all, and George had left his chests unlocked. Besides, the man had like twenty copies of the exact same shirt. He wouldn’t miss one.

“Oh my Prime,” George muttered. “It *is*, isn’t it.”

“No,” Dream repeated, pasting an innocent expression on his face - not that George could see it. The left temple tip of his goggles, previously pinned in the strap of his mask, came loose. Dream hastily tucked it back in before the goggles fell.

George slowly brought his hands to his face. “You’re wearing *clout goggles*,” he said. “*Over your mask.*”

“Yes,” Dream said, like there was nothing wrong with that.

“You’re dressed exactly like me.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. This is how I usually dress.”

“Dream.”

“George.”

“That’s my shirt.”

“It’s *my* shirt.”

“How did you get into my house?!”

“I didn’t, because *it’s my shirt.*”

“You’re a terrible liar.”

“But I’m not lying.”

“You--”

Sapnap walked into the room, took one look at the scene, and walked back out.

26. *cosplay competition, pt. 3*

“Uh.”

Tommy glanced at Technoblade. “What?”

Technoblade stared blankly at the outfit Tommy had donned. He had foregone his usual red-and-white t-shirt, instead sporting a white dress shirt and a royal red cape that he’d gotten from who knew where. A crown was nestled in his hair.

Wilbur appeared around the corner, staring down at his communicator. “Tommy,” he called, looking up. “Why-- what the *hell* are you wearing?”

Tommy scowled at him. “What, I can’t wear capes?”

“I-- no,” Wilbur said, looking bewildered. “You’re, that’s-- what happened to your normal outfit?”

“This *is* my normal outfit.”

“Pretty sure it’s not,” Technoblade grunted. He grabbed the edge of the cape, ignoring how Tommy yelped indignantly and tried to tug it away. “Is this- is this a *shower curtain*?”

“No,” Tommy lied.

“It *is*,” Technoblade muttered incredulously. “Where did you get a shower curtain?”

Tommy scowled. “It’s not a shower curtain,” he insisted. “It’s- it’s my royal cape.”

“Uh-huh,” Technoblade said, finally releasing his grip on the cloth. His gaze turned to the crown. “. . . that’s real gold, isn’t it.”

“Maaaaaybe,” Tommy hedged.

“I’m part piglin, Tommy. I know what real gold looks like.”

Tommy gained a mutinous look. “You don’t know shit, bitch.”

“Where did you get it?”

“What, the crown?” Tommy adjusted it. “Made it myself. Pretty great, innit?”

“What about the gold for the crown?”

Tommy shifted. “I might have committed some theft from the government.”

Wilbur looked like he was about to have an aneurysm. “You snuck into the L’Manberg vaults?!”

Tommy crossed his arms. “I had help! It was fine!”

Technoblade eyed him. “Did you leave any evidence?”

“Of course not,” Tommy sniffed.

“. . . Good job,” Technoblade said, then turned with a dramatic flare of his cape and stalked away. Scowling, Tommy tried to copy him, only for the end of his shower curtain (cape, it was a *cape*) to smack Wilbur in the face.

“Oh shit! Wil, I am so sorry--”

122. cosplay competition, pt. 4 (credit to Smallest)

TW: Implied/Referenced Torture

Quackity took a deep breath as he stepped onto the platform, folding his shaking hands behind his back. His gut churned with a volatile mix of giddiness and disgust. His heart pounded with adrenaline, addicting and revolting. Over a month after the first visit, the feeling hadn't worn off. It wouldn't for a while yet.

Sam pulled the lever and retreated silently into the shadows, expression hidden behind his mask. The platform rumbled beneath Quackity's feet and he forced himself to calm, folding his hands behind his back and painting a more civilized smile across his face.

That was the thing that set him apart from Schlatt. Schlatt didn't try to hide his madness. Quackity did.

The platform ground to a halt at the edge of the obsidian. Quackity stepped off, idly running a finger over the dull edge of the shears as the netherite barrier came down. Dream lay facedown on the obsidian floor, his features obscured by a mop of dirty blonde hair.

Quackity rolled his eyes. "Dream."

Dream didn't respond. Quackity felt his lips pull into a sneer. So this was how he was gonna play it, huh?

"Dream," he repeated, stalking over to the man. Something niggled at the back of his mind, a strange insistence that something wasn't quite right with the scene, but he brushed it aside. "Get up."

Dream groaned. It sounded. . . off, like the pitch wasn't quite right. Quackity chalked it up to him screaming himself hoarse the day before and nudged the prisoner with the toe of his boot.

"Last chance, Dream. Get up."

Dream continued to imitate a rock. Quackity rolled his eyes and kicked him in the side with enough force to roll him over. The prisoner's face came into view, half-obscured by dirty blonde hair.

Quackity's heart plunged into his stomach. This wasn't Dream.

"T-Tommy?"

Tommy lay splayed out on the prison floor, dressed in a slightly undersized, bloodied prison jumpsuit. Quackity dropped down next to him, alarm bells going off in his mind. Dream had escaped. Somehow, he'd gotten out, and replaced himself with Tommy. Sam didn't know yet - *nobody* knew yet. Dream was out there, doing who the fuck knows what, and--

Quackity gritted his teeth, swallowing the rising wave of panic. "Tommy, Tommy, can you hear me?" He reached out to touch Tommy's shoulder. "Tommy?"

Tommy's eyes slid open into thin blue slits. He glared at Quackity.

"M taking a nap, leave me alone."

He proceeded to turn over and snore loudly, leaving a flabbergasted Quackity to gape at his back.

Puffy hummed a cheery tune as she strode down the path, kicking her heels against the ground. The sun rippled across the water on either side of her, tossed by a light breeze. Perfect weather for a stroll through the server.

She stepped into the Community House, still humming, only to stop when she spotted the figure at the far end of the building. They were rummaging through the chests, and bore a familiar red-and-white t-shirt.

Puffy beamed. She hadn't seen Tommy since his miraculous resurrection; he'd made a habit of avoiding everyone post-revival. He certainly looked a lot better, which was a relief. Best announce her presence, though, so she didn't accidentally scare him.

"Tommy?"

The person that looked back at her was decidedly *not* Tommy. Sure, his eyes were the right color, but his facial structure was all wrong. Puffy stared. ". . . *Dream?*"

"Um," Dream squeaked. And when Puffy said *squeak*, she meant that his voice reached Alvin and the Chipmunks level. "Who's Dream?"

Puffy rubbed her eyes, hoping that she'd stop hallucinating. Unfortunately, Dream remained in all his. . . blonde-haired glory. Was he wearing a *wig*?

Dream was still watching her. Puffy exhaled.

"Dream, I. . . how did you break out? Why are you. . ." she waved a hand towards his general person, not quite sure how to verbalize his appearance.

"I'm not Dream--"

"Dream, I've known you for eight years. I've seen your face enough times to know what it looks like."

"Not Dream," Dream insisted. "I'm uh, NotDream123. You can ask Tommy, he'll tell you I'm not Dream."

Puffy blinked. Raised a hand to her face. Took a deep breath.

"I'm going to go to the prison," she told Dream, "And tell Sam that you broke out. And I'm not going to ask you any more questions, because I'm pretty sure I don't want to know."

With that said, she turned on her heel and hurried away. "Broke out of what?" Dream called to her retreating back.

Puffy walked faster.

"Well, Quackity thought I was you for a full minute--"

"You just laid on the floor and played dead the entire time! I actually had to talk!"

"At least I fooled Quackity--"

"I fooled Puffy too! And my costumes were more accurate than yours."

"Right, because you *stole* your costumes-- at least I actually made mine!"

"Not all of us have sewing skills!"

They glared at each other, neither willing to concede. At last, Dream sighed, tugging his blonde wig off.

". . . Let's just call it a draw, yeah?"

"Fine," Tommy sniffed. "But my George cosplay was still better than yours."

"You *take that back--*"

the nyan chronicles (complete)

Chapter Summary

TLDR: Tommy and Dream convinced DreamXD to overwrite every disc on the server with the nyan cat song. They then manage to rig every jukebox on the server to play nyan cat as well, regardless of whether it contained a disc or not.

15. *the nyan chronicles, pt. 1 (credit to hhhhhhhh)*

“Tommy, no.”

“Tommy, *yes*.”

“What the hell could you offer him?”

“My soul.”

“Tommy--”

“Relax, big man. I was joking. Though honestly, if I did sell my soul, would it get undone when we loop?”

“I’d rather not find out. So what are you *really* going to offer him?”

“Oh my Prime, Dream, just let me talk to him. Have some faith, will you?”

“Given how the last loop went--”

“We’re talking about this loop, not the last one. C’mon, it’s not like there’s lasting consequences.”

“... Fine.”

“Holy shit that actually *worked*?”

“Yep! I told you to have faith, big man--”

“--faith in XD’s *idiocy*?”

--shhhhh, he can probably hear us!”

“ . . . ”

“ . . . ”

“ . . . so why exactly did you want him to overwrite all the discs on the SMP with the Nyan Cat theme?”

“Think of the memes, Dream. Think of the *memes*.”

“Ranboo.”

“Yes?”

“This. . . this is Chirp, right?”

“ . . . Yeah, that looks like Chirp. Why?”

In lieu of answering, Tubbo shoved the disc into a jukebox. A series of high-pitched electric notes played out, followed by an electronic voice repeatedly singing--

“ . . . Nyan?” Ranboo asked uncertainly. “Is that. . . is that the Nyan Cat song?”

“Yeah,” Tubbo answered. He removed the disc, shoving in a Pigstep one instead. The same song began playing.

Ranboo stared at the jukebox. “ . . . What?”

Tubbo brushed his bangs to the side. “I tried these discs with another jukebox, too. Played the same thing. Do you have any discs?”

Ranboo couldn’t suppress the full-body flinch that question gave him, and did his best not to think about a buried chest and a single disc lying inside it. “No,” he replied truthfully, “but I can probably go ask around. See if people are having the same issue and whatnot.”

“Okay,” Tubbo replied absently. He yanked Pigstep out of the jukebox, cutting off the semi-annoying music. “You do that.”

“Foolish?”

The god looked up. “Hey, Ranboo!” he greeted cheerily, setting down the block of stone he was holding. “What’s up?”

Ranboo fidgeted nervously with his sleeves. “Uh. . . do you. . . do you have any discs?”

Foolish blinked. “Discs? I think I might have one or two in a chest somewhere. Why?”

“Uh. Something’s wrong with Tubbo’s, and I was wondering if it was happening to anyone else.”

Foolish shrugged, making a ‘follow me’ gesture and turning away. Ranboo obliged. “I can take a look,” the totem god said. “I needed a break from building anyways.”

He opened a chest and pulled out Wait, popping it into a nearby jukebox. Nyan Cat music began playing.

“Huh,” Foolish said slowly, then ejected the disc and put in Blocks, only to get the same result.

“That’s strange,” Foolish muttered, strolling over to a different jukebox and shoving Wait into it. Ranboo winced as Nyan Cat began playing again, clashing out-of-sync with the Nyan Cat playing from the first jukebox. “Was Tubbo having this. . . problem too?”

Ranboo nodded. Foolish sighed.

“Well, this could be a glitch,” he said, removing the discs from the jukeboxes. The music stopped instantly, leaving blessed silence behind. “But I doubt it. It’s probably a prank of some sort, though I don’t know how the prankster could’ve pulled it off. Or who they could be, for that matter. Maybe Fundy? He had a history of pranking, right?”

“. . . Maybe,” Ranboo agreed weakly. “Well. Uh. Thanks, Foolish. I. . . I better be going now.”

“Bye, Ranboo! Good luck figuring this out!”

“Ranboo?”

“Hi, Philza,” Ranboo greeted nervously.

Philza blinked. “Hey mate. What happened?”

“Uh. . . do you have any discs?”

“Discs?” Philza shook his head. “No, but I think Techno might have some. Why?”

“There’s a problem with Tu-my. *My* discs. They’re all playing the Nyan Cat theme for some reason.”

Philza blinked slowly. “I-- the Nyan Cat theme?”

“The Nyan Cat theme,” Ranboo affirmed gravely. “Foolish’s too. Do you have any idea why?”

“. . . No,” Philza said slowly. “You could try asking Techno.”

“. . . What,” Technoblade deadpanned, staring at the jukebox he’d just put Pigstep into. “Why. How. What.”

“Foolish said it was probably a prank of some kind,” Ranboo offered. “Though he’s not sure who would do this.”

“Or why,” Philza muttered, narrowing his eyes at the jukebox. He ejected the disc, then put it back in. When the first notes of Nyan Cat started playing, he pulled it out, then put it back in, and continued to repeat this sequence of actions several more times until--

“Okay, that’s enough,” Technoblade grumbled, snatching the disc from Philza’s hands. “I feel like every time I listen to this, it gets more annoyin’.”

Philza had the decency to look sheepish. “Sorry.”

Ranboo studiously ignored the twitching in his own eye. “It’s fine. Uh. I’m. . . I’m gonna go see if anyone has any discs that *aren’t* Nyan Cat.”

Technoblade grimaced. “If you happen to find a Pigstep. . .”

“I’ll let you know.”

Ranboo stepped into Kinoko Kingdom and was instantly blasted in the face with the sound of five jukeboxes playing Nyan Cat at the exact same time. How the heck had they coordinated it?

“GEORGE, WAKE UP, HELP ME!” Sapnap screamed. “OH PRIME MAKE IT STOP--”

“NEVER!” Karl shrieked. “ACCEPT NYAN CAT AS YOUR LORD AND SAVIOR--”

Ranboo turned around and walked away. Yeah, no, he wasn't touching that with a ten foot pole.

22. *the nyan chronicles, pt. 2*

Ranboo awoke to a crash and a harsh, discordant screech. Leaping out of bed, he summoned his axe and rushed outside, expecting the worst.

Instead, he found his platonic husband standing over the broken remains of their jukeboxes, dressed in pajamas and a sledgehammer in his hands. "Tubbo?" he called cautiously.

Tubbo slowly turned to him. "Someone is going to die today," he promised darkly.

Ranboo took a step back. "Uh. . . why?"

"Can you hear it, Ranboo?"

"No?" Ranboo answered, half confused and all concerned. Was. . . was Tubbo hearing voices?

Tubbo leaned in, his blue eyes glinting eerily in the moonlight. "Listen."

Ranboo hesitated, then tried to focus on his hearing. All he heard was the wind around them. "I don't--"

"Listen."

Ranboo narrowed his eyes, straining his ears. Underneath the wind, there was another sound, almost like. . .

"Nyan cat?" he asked incredulously.

"Do you know what's happening, Ranboo?" Tubbo asked "Did you read your communicator?"

"No. . .?" Ranboo realized he was still holding his axe, and hastily dropped it back into his inventory before he pulled out his communicator.

<Sapnap>: whoever decided it was a good idea to play nyan cat at two in the morning, your days are numbered

<GeorgeNotFound>: wait i thought it was karl?

<KarlJacobs>: you think I would do that? i'm hurt </3

<Sapnap>: all of them are playing at the exact same fucking time

<Sapnap>: its so LOUD

<FoolishG>: so I'm not the only one that woke up to nyan cat blasting from my jukeboxes?

<CaptainPuffy>: you too? mine won't stop playing

<Sapnap>: the disc isnt coming out

<Sapnap>: wait

<FoolishG>: oh no

<Sapnap>: i don't think there IS a disc

<KarlJacobs>: DID YOU JUST BREAK OUR JUKEBOXES

<Sapnap>: yup no discs, just an empty jukebox

<GeorgeNotFound>: you are a menace

<Sapnap>: pot meet kettle

<Sapnap>: oop gtg karl's on a warpath

<CaptainPuffy>: wait wait wait so its the jukeboxes playing the song?? not the discs?

<FoolishG>: nope

<FoolishG>: think this is the same guy who overwrote all the discs on the server?

<CaptainPuffy>: probably

<CaptainPuffy>: who else would it be?

<Technoblade>: give me a name

<Technoblade>: so I can know who to kill

<Tubbo_>: i think every jukebox is playing nyan cat

<Tubbo_>: at the exact same time

<Tubbo_>: I can hear it from here

<FoolishG>: when you say EVERY jukebox, do you mean like every jukebox that exists or

<Tubbo_>: brb gonna go find a sledgehammer

<CaptainPuffy>: a sledgehammer? Why

<CaptainPuffy>: ah nvm

<FoolishG>: they keep playing even in my inventory help

<Nihachu>: *who would do this?*

<FoollishGamers>: *fundy?*

<Fundy>: *listen i like pranks*

<Fundy>: *but i'm not insane enough to rig every jukebox on the server to play nyan cat*

<Fundy>: *AT 2 AM IN THE MORNING*

<Nihachu>: *who else would it be?*

<Fundy>: *not to point fingers but tommy's been suspiciously quiet*

<Technoblade>: *Tommy. Got it.*

<Ph1lzA>: *wait techno no*

<Ph1lzA>: *TECHNO*

“Ah,” Ranboo said. He eyed the shattered remains of their jukebox, then looked up at Tubbo. “That’s. Something.”

“Oh, it’s *something* alright,” Tubbo hissed, eyes wild with sleep-deprivation-induced rage. “I’m gonna-- I’m gonna find every jukebox on the server, and then I’m gonna *bash it to pieces*.”

“Right, right.” Ranboo nodded nervously. “And I’ll help, but let’s get some sleep first--”

“No.”

Well, it was worth a try. “At least change out of your pajamas?”

Tubbo loosened the death grip he had on his sledgehammer. “Fine,” he decided, then marched back into the mansion.

Ranboo sent one last mournful glance at the remains of their jukeboxes before following.

44. the nyan chronicles, pt. 3 (credit to Good_Pename)

“Tommy, step away from him.”

Tommy shifted. “Nah,” he said nonchalantly. “I’d rather not.”

“I don’t-- I don’t understand,” Tubbo said weakly. “Why did you break him out? Why are you siding with him? What-- *why?*”

“Think carefully about this,” Quackity warned, his eyes dark. “He can’t be trusted, Tommy. He’s a liar. A manipulator.”

“And you’re not?” Tommy shot back. “I know what you did to Purpled, Quackity. You’re just as bad as *him*.”

“Tommy,” Sam cut in, stepping in front of Quackity before he could react poorly. “Don’t you remember how he hurt you? You can’t-- he’s not your friend, Tommy, he’s lying--”

“Shut up, Sam,” Tommy snarled. The creeper hybrid took a step back at the unexpected vitriol. “You left me to *die*, you asshole. Don’t pretend you care.”

“Tommy, please,” Tubbo begged. “Please don’t do this.”

“Look, as touching as this is,” Dream interrupted, “Can we get on with the arresting part? I know you’re all eager to throw me back in jail--”

Tommy spun on his heel and kicked him in the shin. Dream yelped and hopped away, clutching the bruised area. “Shut up, the adults are talking!”

Dream flipped him off but acquiesced, miming zipping his mouth shut with his other hand. Tubbo’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Tommy,” Quackity repeated, stepping forward. The teenager in question instantly stiffened, drawing a netherite axe from his inventory. The tension skyrocketed as everyone else automatically settled into a fighting stance.

And then a giant eldritch being came crashing through a rip in time and space, jabbed a finger in Dream and Tommy’s direction, and growled, **“You.”**

Dream and Tommy instantly paled. “Oh shit,” the younger muttered, taking an unconscious step back. XD stalked - or, more accurately, floated - forward, his cloak flaring dramatically.

“You lied to me,” he snarled. **“George does not like Nyan Cat. He is upset with me.”**

“It was a joke?” Dream tried, a bead of sweat running down the side of his face. “You know, like, a prank?”

XD’s anger appeared to abate a little. **“George has explained these. . . pranks to me. You have. . . ‘pranked’ me?”**

Tommy nodded furiously. “Yeah. Yep. That’s exactly what we did. We pranked you into pranking the whole server and making the jukeboxes play Nyan Cat.”

“I do not enjoy being lied to.”

“We’re not lying, big uhhhh, X,” Tommy protested. “You got pranked, but it didn’t hurt anyone, right? And you, uh, successfully pranked the rest of the SMP too. Props and shit to you.”

“This prank was not funny,” XD snapped. He floated slightly higher, looming over the two mortals. **“You will regret deceiving me.”**

Dream quickly shoved his way in front of Tommy. “What about a payment?” he asked. Tommy’s head turned sharply towards him. “We’ll give you something as penance for lying to you.”

“Not our souls,” Tommy blurted. Then he clamped his jaw shut, eyes going round as he realized what he’d just said. “Uh, shit, I mean--”

“Payment,” XD intoned. He tilted his head in consideration. **“That is acceptable.”**

Dream let out a quiet sigh of relief as the entity floated backwards. XD shrunk, cloak folding up into a lime green hoodie. He landed on the ground between the two groups, now perfectly identical to Dream save for his lack of scars.

“Give me your discs,” he intoned. **“And your mask. Your most valuable possessions.”**

A pause. Dream and Tommy glanced at each other, then turned back to XD. “Deal,” they said in unison. Tommy reached into his inventory and produced his ender chest, reluctantly withdrawing his discs and handing them to XD. Dream followed suit with his mask, unclipping it from his head and holding it out.

XD reached out and took them, examining them for a moment before they abruptly caught fire and disintegrated to ash in his hands. Tommy let out an abrupt cry and made to move forward, but Dream hastily pulled him back.

“Let this be a warning,” XD rumbled. **“Do not cross me again.”**

There was an awkward pause as he turned away, ripped open another tear in reality, and stepped through it. Both groups of mortals watched as the tear stitched itself back together, disappearing like nothing had been there in the first place.

A low, rumbling growl shattered the silence. Tommy turned to see Tubbo, staring intently at them, hands twitching like he was itching for a weapon. “*You*,” he snarled.

Tommy took a step back. “Uh, big man? You. . . you good?”

“*You* were responsible for the Nyan Cat?!” Tubbo shrieked. Tommy paled as the other teenager pulled a ridiculously oversized sledgehammer from his inventory and started towards them. “I am going to *fucking bash your heads in!*”

“Uh, Tubbo--” Tommy started. Dream grabbed his arm and yanked him back.

“Run,” the older man hissed, shoving him in the other direction. “**RUN!**”

Tubbo lunged. Tommy ran for his life.

adoption arc (complete)

Chapter Summary

TLDR: This loop starts right as Tommy joins the server - aka, very early. Dream vows to adopt every minor on the server. Tommy is, of course, against this. (And Ranboo joins the server before the creation of L'Manberg.)

16. *adoption arc, pt. 1 (inspired by Trytokillmeorsomething123)*

“What. . .” Tommy looked around. “Dream, what-- where are we? *When* are we?”

Dream turned to him, and Tommy did a double take. He looked *young*.

“We’re. . .” Dream said, a wide grin spreading across his face. “Tommy, Tommy-- we’re before the Disc wars.”

“The Disc--” Tommy stopped short. “Holy *shit*.” He turned behind him to see Spawn. “Did I-- did I *just* join the server?”

“We’re so *early*,” Dream breathed.

They stood there in silence for a moment, simply taking in their surroundings. The SMP, back when it was still being built up, before the wars and betrayals and violence. They had a chance, here, a chance to have the life that could have been.

Dream sighed. “Well,” he said quietly. “What do you want to do?”

“What are *you* gonna do?” Tommy challenged. “Because if you’re gonna be an asshole this time around, I’ll kill you.”

Dream snorted. “I think I’ll take the pacifist route, actually.”

“Pacifist-- this isn’t fucking Undertale!”

“Look me in the eye and tell me that I can’t call loop zero neutral.”

Tommy glared.

Dream grinned. “Thought so. Well then, I’ll ask again. What do you want to do?”

“. . . Will you invite Wilbur to the server?”

Dream looked thoughtful. “Yeah,” he decided at last. “But not Schlatt. Schlatt’s staying out.”

Tommy scowled. "Right, fuck him. If you invite him, I'll stab him. And then I'll stab you."

"So I won't invite him," Dream said cheerily, clapping his hands together. "Well then. I'm off."

"Wait, wait, you never told me what you were gonna do!" Tommy protested.

Dream paused, then adjusted his mask and looked him dead in the eye. "I'm going to adopt all the minors," he said calmly. "All. The minors."

And then he was gone, disappearing before Tommy could even formulate a reply.

"Wait," Tommy spluttered to empty air. "Wait, am I a minor--"

25. adoption arc, pt. 2 (credit to Trytokillmeorsomething123)

"You know," Tubbo hummed. "Dream doesn't seem like a bad guy."

Tommy dropped the block he was holding and rounded on him. "*What?*"

Tubbo blinked. "Uh. . . Dream doesn't--"

"No, I heard you the first time," Tommy snapped. "What the-- what the *hell*, Tubbo."

Tubbo shrugged. "When I first got to the server, he showed me around, introduced me to Sapnap and George, stuff like that. He seems pretty friendly!"

Tommy rubbed his temples. "Tubbo-- Tubbo, big man, Dream is a *bastard*."

Tubbo's eyes darkened. "Was he mean to you?"

Tommy hastily backpedaled. "No, no, he wasn't-- or he *was*, but not really-- argh. It's kinda complicated?"

Tubbo's eyebrows rose.

"Look," Tommy huffed. "You can't trust him, Tubbo. He's gonna-- he's gonna try to *adopt* you."

Tubbo frowned and heaved another block onto the wall he was building. "Um. Okay? Bit early for that, I'd like to get to know him first."

"Do you see *nothing* wrong with this?"

Tubbo blinked slowly. "You make it sound like he's trying to kill me or something," he pointed out. "What's so bad about adoption?"

"It's-- it's *Dream*," Tommy protested, at a loss for words. The other boy sighed.

“That doesn’t explain anything, Tommy.”

Tommy made a frustrated noise and slammed his next block down with more force than strictly necessary.

41. *adoption arc, pt. 3*

“Thanks,” Purpled muttered as Dream dumped another stack of concrete into the chest. He ran a hand over the blueprints laid out before him. “I think that’s enough.”

Dream dusted off his hands, then leaned back and stretched, spine cracking. Purpled wrinkled his nose.

“I’m going to have so many posture problems when I’m older,” Dream muttered. He leaned over to peer at the blueprints. “Is that everything?”

“No. I still need lime stained glass.” Purpled stalked over to another chest and yanked it open, rummaging through its contents. “I don’t have enough dye.”

“Then I’ll help you get some.”

Purpled paused, then straightened and turned to him. “Okay, for real. Why are you doing this?”

Dream blinked at him. “I told you, I wanted to get to know the people on my server better.”

“You don’t get anything from that,” Purpled insisted. “People only ever help me because they want something. So what do you want? A favor? Someone dead?”

“Friendship,” Dream replied. “I’m not going to ask you to kill someone, Purpled. I invited you to my server so you could meet the others and have fun.”

Purpled laughed. “Yeah, right. I’ll ask again: what do you want?”

Dream reached up and pushed his mask to one side of his head so Purpled could see his face. “And I’ll say it again. Friendship.”

Purpled stared at him. “You’re being serious.”

“I’m being serious,” Dream confirmed. “I know you fought in the underground Hypixel rings. You were one of the best. If you wanted to fight, you would have ignored my invite and stayed where you were. But you accepted. You came to this server for peace, and that’s exactly what you’re gonna get.”

Purpled watched him for a long moment. “I don’t trust you.”

“Understandable,” Dream agreed casually. “Guess I’ll have to work for that.”

Purpled huffed out something close to a laugh. “Guess you will,” he drawled, turning away. “. . . And you can start by helping me gather some green dye.”

Dream grinned. “On it.”

49. *adoption arc, pt. 4*

“What the fuck.”

“Hi,” Ranboo said nervously. “Uh. I’m Ranboo? I’m new here.”

“What the fuck,” the blonde boy repeated, staring blankly at him. His shorter companion elbowed him in the ribs and stepped forward, holding out a hand.

“Hey, I’m Tubbo!” he chirped cheerily. “That’s Tommy. Sorry about him, he’s kinda bad at social interaction.”

“Excuse you?!” The tall blonde-- *Tommy* cut in. “I’m the fucking best at social in- inter-intra--”

“Interaction,” Tubbo supplied.

--interaction! Don’t listen to Tubbo, he spouts lies and slander--”

“I speak the truth,” Tubbo declared. “Trust me, Rambo.”

Ranboo smiled nervously. “Uh, my name’s. Um. Ranboo.”

Tubbo winced. “Whoops, sorry. Ranboo.”

“Ranboob,” Tommy added, an evil grin spreading across his face. It quickly disappeared when Tubbo stepped on his foot.

“Don’t scare off the fresh meat,” Tubbo chided, ignoring Ranboo’s questioning mutter of “*fresh meat?*” He turned to Ranboo, and then *holy moly* he was literally *right next to him* *Ranboo hadn’t even seen him move how?* “Wow, Tommy,” he said, staring up at Ranboo. “I think he’s even taller than you.”

“Uh. . . th-thanks?” Ranboo stuttered, still trying to figure out how Tubbo had gotten up in his face without him noticing. Tubbo beamed at him, then looked back at Tommy, who was balancing on one foot and rubbing the one Tubbo had stepped on with a grimace on his face.

“Height check!” Tubbo called.

“Fuck off,” Tommy snapped. Oh boy. Ranboo hoped he hadn’t upset him.

Nah, who was he kidding? Tommy probably hated him already.

“Tommy,” Tubbo chirped. There was a note of warning in his voice. “Height check.”

Tommy looked up, looked at Ranboo, then rolled his eyes and straightened up. Ranboo shrunk into himself a bit as the human stalked over, muttering something under his breath. He was pretty tall for a non-hybrid, all things considered. He also didn't seem very happy at the moment.

Ranboo ducked his head in an attempt to seem smaller. Maybe if Tubbo said they were the same height, Tommy wouldn't get mad?

"Oh for fuck's sake," Tommy grumbled as Tubbo stepped back to assess their heights. "Stand up, man. You're gonna get back problems with posture like that."

Ranboo blinked. "I-- sorry?"

"Stand up," Tommy repeated. "Don't fold in on yourself like that. You're tall, be proud of it."

Ranboo hesitantly straightened up. Tommy smirked up at him.

"That's more like it," he declared. "Prime, you're absolutely fucking *massive*. What the hell do you eat?"

Ranboo shuffled nervously. "I'm, uh. Half enderman."

"Explains a lot," Tommy muttered. "You comfortable with eye contact?"

Ranboo blinked in surprise. Nobody. . . nobody had ever asked him that before, actually. People usually reacted pretty negatively when they found out he was a hostile mob hybrid. But Tommy and Tubbo weren't looking at him like they expected him to suddenly go feral. No, Tommy had asked if Ranboo was *comfortable* with eye contact.

Maybe he'd misjudged Tommy.

Ranboo felt a bit of his nervousness dissipate. "Uh, yeah. It, it bothers me sometimes, when I'm, uh, really emotional, but, uh, just, like this is fine."

Tommy nodded. "Got it, big man." Then he paused, face screwing up like he'd bitten a lemon. "I'm still the bigger man, of course."

"And I'm the biggest man of all!" Tubbo called.

Tommy opened his mouth to argue, paused, then shrugged. "And Tubbo is the biggest man of them all."

Tubbo cheered, and Ranboo was surprised to find himself smiling. Maybe this server wouldn't be so bad after all.

“Why the fuck is Ranboo on the server?!”

“I invited him,” Dream said, like he saw nothing wrong with that.

“Dream, he joined after the Sixteenth last time.”

“I tracked him down and invited him earlier than I did in loop zero,” Dream amended.

Tommy stared at him. “*Why?*”

Dream shrugged. “I did say I was going to adopt all the minors, didn’t I? Might as well get a head start.”

56. *adoption arc, pt. 5*

“You’re *what?*”

“Baking with Dream,” Purpled replied. “I’ll be free at four.”

“I cannot believe this,” Tommy hissed. “You’re gonna abandon me for *Dream?*”

“You’re welcome to join us,” Purpled offered dryly. “Ranboo does sometimes.”

“The *boob boy* is involved too?!” Tommy shrieked.

Purpled, who was now very used to his dramatics, simply turned away and waved a hand.

“Anyways, I’ll meet you at the UFO in two hours. Might be a bit late.”

“I will remember this betrayal!” Tommy shouted at his retreating back.

“What exactly do you have against Dream?”

“He’s a bitch.”

“You literally run away every time he comes within ten feet of you,” Tubbo deadpanned. He set his watering can down. “I think it’s a bit more than that.”

“I’m not scared of him,” Tommy snapped. Tubbo side-eyed him. “I’m *not!*”

“If you say so, Tommy.”

There was a long moment of silence. Tubbo silently counted down the seconds until Tommy cracked.

“Okay,” Tommy grumbled just as Tubbo hit zero. “He’s-- he’s trying to adopt us.”

“Yeah, you told me.”

“I don’t want to be adopted.”

“Why not?” At Tommy’s incredulous look, Tubbo shrugged. “It’s not like a serious thing, right?”

“But it’s *Dream*.”

“You say that like it means something.”

“It *does*.”

“Then explain it to me.”

Tommy made a frustrated noise. They’d already had this exact conversation three times before, and his answer was the same every time. “It’s complicated!”

“Uh-huh,” Tubbo said dubiously, hefting his watering can and moving over to another patch of flowers in the garden. “Y’know, you can’t avoid him forever.”

Tommy bared his teeth. “*Watch* me.”

“Ranboob, what the fuck are you doing?”

“*Ranboo*,” Ranboo corrected. “I’m waiting for someone.”

Tommy blinked. “What? Why?”

“He’s teaching me self-defense.”

“I thought you hated fighting.”

“I do,” Ranboo assured. “But I gotta defend myself too. I’ll have to move to a different server eventually, and the people there might not be as nice to hybrids.”

Tommy grimaced. “Point. Who’s teaching you? Technoblade?”

Ranboo blinked. “Who?”

“Technoblade,” Tommy repeated, then paused. “Oh wait, bitch hasn’t joined the server yet. Sam then?”

“... No,” Ranboo said slowly. “*Dream*.”

Tommy stared at him. “*Dream?*”

“Yeah. Dream.” Ranboo shuffled his feet, gaze drifting slightly to the side. “Look, I know you don’t like him--”

“No, Ranboo, you don’t understand,” Tommy hissed. “He has *motives*. He’s gonna win your trust and then he’s gonna *adopt* you. He’s a fuckin’ bastard--”

“I know.”

Tommy stopped, taken aback. “You know?”

“I know,” Ranboo deadpanned. “Tubbo told me about your rants.”

“I will be having *words* with him,” Tommy muttered, then turned to Ranboo. “Stay away from ‘im, you hear?”

Ranboo nodded, the same way an indulgent adult would nod at a small child spouting nonsense. “Okay, Tommy.”

“I’m being serious!”

“He’s really not that bad,” Ranboo countered. “If you spend some time with him--”

“I absolutely *refuse*-- ”

“Tommy!”

Tommy shrieked as a hand landed heavily on his head, ruffling his hair. He whipped around and batted the offending appendage away, then kicked Dream in the shin for good measure. Dream simply sidestepped, letting his foot hit empty air. “Hello to you too, child. Are you here to join us?”

“I will murderize you,” Tommy promised darkly. “I will kill you until you’re dead, and then I’ll burn your body and dance on the ashes.”

“Okay,” Dream chirped, completely unbothered. He ruffled Tommy’s hair again. “Have fun.”

Tommy let out an enraged scream and lunged for his throat.

78. *adoption arc, pt. 6*

“No.”

“Yes,” Tubbo countered. “Join us.”

“No,” Tommy snapped. He turned, only to stop dead in his tracks when Purpled appeared, blocking his path. “Oh fuck, you’re in on this too?”

“Join us,” Purpled deadpanned. His face was perfectly blank, but Tommy could see the amusement shining in his eyes. “We have cookies.”

“I don’t care about your shitty cookies,” Tommy grumbled. He pushed past Purpled and strode deeper into the forest.

“You might wanna stop, Tommy,” Tubbo called. Tommy rolled his eyes and sped up--
--and promptly tripped over a wire. The trap went off and a net snapped up around Tommy, yanking him kicking and cursing into the branches of a tree.

“What the fuck!” he shrieked, flailing blindly. The branch the net was hanging from creaking dangerously.

“I warned you,” Tubbo chirped. He skipped over to the net and looked up at Tommy, tilting his head to the side. “So. Join us?”

“Fuck no!” Tommy howled, clawing at the net with his hands. “Lemme out! Purpled! I’ll give you a diamond if you get me out!”

Purpled hummed. “Nah.”

“Whaddya mean ‘nah’?!” Tommy spluttered. Purpled shrugged.

Ranboo burst into the clearing, eyes blown wide with alarm. “What’s happening?” he called. “I heard Tommy screaming and--” he stared at the scene, then turned to Tubbo. “What are you doing? Why is Tommy in a net?”

“We’re trying to get Tommy to sign his adoption papers,” Tubbo answered, holding up a sheaf of papers. Ranboo squinted at them.

“Uh. Those are the adoption papers?”

“Yep.”

Ranboo blinked slowly. “‘I certify that Dream’s my brother now lol’,” he read aloud.

Tubbo’s grin widened. “Yep. And the rest of the packet is just a description of the risks of adopting Tommy.”

Ranboo glanced between Tubbo and Tommy, who was glaring at all of them from within the net. “. . . why are we trying to coerce Tommy into signing adoption papers?”

“Dream’s birthday is tomorrow,” Purpled explained. “We thought this would be a nice present.”

“Ah,” Ranboo said. He turned to Tommy. “C’mon Tommy, do something nice for Dream.”

“*Never,*” Tommy hissed. “*Let me out.*”

“Just sign it,” Tubbo coaxed, holding the adoption papers up towards the net. Tommy snatched the papers from his grasp, ripped them in half, and threw it back in his face. Tubbo didn’t bat an eye as he pulled out another packet of adoption papers and held them up. These, too, met an untimely demise, balled up into wads and tossed at Ranboo’s head.

“Just so you know,” Purpled cut in, “both Tubbo and I maxed out our inventories with copies of these. We have another twenty or so stacks hidden in strategic locations around the SMP. Just sign it, Tommy. Resistance is futile.”

“You know, taken out of context, that could sound very bad.”

“Shut up, Ranboo. Nobody asked for your opinion.”

“Wow, *okay*.”

Tommy huffed, his gaze calculating. “If I sign the stupid papers, will you let me out?”

“Yup!” Tubbo promised. “I swear it on the bees!”

“Oh, he swore on the *bees*,” Purpled whispered loudly. “He’s *serious*.”

Tommy rolled his eyes and snatched the papers from Tubbo. “I need a pen,” he grumbled.

“Wait,” Ranboo said suddenly. “Wait, is that why you told me to fill my inventory with quills?”

“Maybe,” Tubbo chirped. “Give him a pen, Ranboo.”

Ranboo stared at him for a long moment. “*This* is why I spent an entire day grinding for ink?”

“It’s for Dream!” Tubbo said, like that justified everything.

“C’mon, Ranboo,” Tommy mocked, “do something nice for Dream.”

Ranboo groaned and pulled a quill from his inventory, handing it to Tommy. Tommy begrudgingly scribbled a messy signature before he threw the papers and pen at Tubbo. Tubbo caught them before they could whack him in the face, grinning widely.

“Thank you for your cooperation,” he chirped. “Purpled, if you will.”

Purpled winced. “Uh. I don’t have any weapons on me right now.” At Tubbo’s judgmental stare, he threw his hands into the air. “Maxed out my inventory with adoption papers, remember?!”

Tubbo turned to Ranboo, who shook his head. “Sorry, I left all my pointy objects at home today.”

“Should I be worried?”

“Dream!” Tubbo whirled around, the adoption papers disappearing into his inventory with a flash. “Hello!”

“Hi,” Dream replied, looking amused. He glanced between Tommy and the three teenagers standing under him. “. . . are you trying to kill Tommy?”

“No!”

“Yes!”

“Maybe.”

Ranboo turned to Tubbo and Purpled with a *look*. Dream suppressed a laugh and waved a hand. “Carry on, then.”

“You *bastard!*” Tommy exploded, flailing angrily. “I am going to murder you so hard--”

“We can’t,” Tubbo lamented over Tommy’s furious shouting. “We don’t have any pointy objects. Could you give us one of yours?”

Dream eyed the children contemplatively for a moment, then shrugged and held out his sword. “Thanks!” Tubbo cheered, snatching it. He raced over to the net.

“Stay the fuck away from me!” Tommy shrieked. Tubbo ignored him, slashing the sword through the netting. Tommy fell through in a mess of tangled limbs and rope, hitting the ground with an *oomph*. He lay there, dazed, for all of two seconds before he scrambled to his feet and lunged at Tubbo. Tubbo danced out of the way, leaving Ranboo straight in Tommy’s path. The enderman hybrid froze like a deer in headlights, tail fluffing out, just as Tommy bowled him over. The two rolled across the ground, somehow ending up with Tommy pinning Ranboo to the floor in a chokehold.

“Gimme the adoption papers, or I snap his neck,” Tommy threatened.

“Go ahead,” Purpled said smugly. “We already got what we needed.”

“The-- *betrayal*,” Ranboo wheezed, trying fruitlessly to push himself off the ground. Tommy pulled harder on his neck and he gave up, flopping to the ground.

“. . . Adoption papers?” Dream asked.

“Adoption papers,” Tubbo confirmed happily.

Tommy’s eyes widened and he yanked at Ranboo, eliciting a weak choking noise. “Don’t you dare, Tubbo--”

“Here!” Tubbo shoved the signed sheaf of papers in Dream’s direction. “We were gonna give these to you tomorrow, but I guess now works too! Happy early birthday!”

Tommy abandoned all pretense of murdering Ranboo and lunged for the two, but Purpled was somehow faster. He stuck his foot out and tripped Tommy, then proceeded to sit on his

back while Tommy flailed and cursed at him. Dream, meanwhile, was flipping through the packet, a strange expression on his face.

“‘Possible loss of hearing’?” He asked. “‘Extreme exhaustion to the point of passing out’? ‘A one hundred percent chance of death’?”

“All life eventually comes to an end,” Tubbo said, sounding like he was trying to channel his inner Master Oogway. “Oh, and the loss of hearing thing is because of Tommy’s very large lung capacity.”

Both of them looked over to Tommy, who was still screaming obscenities at Purpled. “I see,” Dream said dryly. He looked back down at the papers, running an eye over the messy signature, then raised his voice. “Aww, I didn’t know you cared, Tommy.”

Tommy paused in his tirade for a moment, head whipping around. “FUCK YOU!” he howled, doubling his efforts to wiggle free. “FUCK YOU, YOU ABSOLUTE ASSHOLE--”

“Love you too,” Dream sang, waving the signed adoption paper around. Tommy spluttered, so angry that he was completely unable to form words.

“I hate you so much,” he informed Dream with a sort of bewildered fury.

“I know,” Dream said.

“I hope you die in a hole.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You are the absolute worst.”

“If you say so.”

Tommy groaned and let his head drop to the ground. “. . . I want an infinite supply of cookies,” he grumbled at last. “If you’re gonna adopt me, you’re gonna hafta *pay* me.”

Dream grinned. “That can be arranged.”

50. *(inspired by Havis)*

“We need a distraction,” Wilbur hissed. He ducked as another arrow went flying over their heads. “Something to get them off our backs long enough for us to get behind them.”

Tommy grinned. “I got this,” he assured them. Ignoring Tubbo’s cry of “Wait!” he hopped out from behind the wall, sidestepping an arrow that would have taken his eye out.

“Dad! Stop shooting for one fucking second and listen to me!”

The effect was instantaneous. Dream dropped his bow, gaping at him. Meanwhile, George, Sapnap and Punz all glanced at each other before simultaneously swiveling to stare at Dream.

“I-- you-- *what?*” Dream spluttered.

Tommy fought hard to keep a serious expression on his face. “Dad,” he repeated, crossing his arms. “Seriously. Just let us get our independence--”

“Wait wait wait wait,” Sapnap interrupted, stepping in between the two of them. “You-- he-- what the *fuck?*”

Tommy could feel his poker face slowly cracking. “He adopted me a while back,” he informed the group.

“Not-- not as your *dad!*” Dream shrieked. His ears had gone bright red. “Don’t-- what the hell-- *why* the hell--”

Tommy nodded. “You did adopt me. Which makes you my dad.”

“You *adopted* Tommy?” George demanded, rounding on Dream. “Why didn’t you tell us?!”

“I’m not his dad,” Dream protested weakly.

Tommy gasped, eyes welling up with crocodile tears. “You. . . you don’t want me?”

“Wait wait wait no!” Dream cried as Sapnap’s eyes narrowed. “No, I meant that I--”

“That’s kinda fucked up,” Tommy continued, bulldozing right through his argument. “I mean, you were the one that wanted to adopt me. And now you’re just gonna abandon me?”

“*Dream!*” George scolded. Dream let out something between a hysterical laugh and a wail of despair, sinking to his knees and burying his face in his hands.

At that moment, Wilbur and the other revolutionaries burst out of the treeline behind the Dream SMP fighters. Dream and the others whipped around, but it was already too late. With the element of surprise on their side, the L’Manbergians easily cut them down. Tommy finally let his affronted expression drop, collapsing to the ground in a fit of cackling.

“Oh my fucking Prime,” he wheezed. “Did you-- did you see his *face*--”

He was interrupted by Wilbur, who dropped down to his knees in front of him, placed his hands on his shoulders, and asked very seriously, “Tommy, did Dream adopt you?”

Tommy snorted. “Only kinda,” he replied dismissively. “It’ll be a cold day in the Nether before I call him ‘dad’ unironically.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Fundy cut in. “You said ‘only kinda’-- that wasn’t-- that wasn’t a *no*. ”

Tommy sighed. “It’s a long story,” was all he said. “A *really* long story.”

lava (complete)

Chapter Summary

TLDR: Tommy and Dream play The Floor Is Lava at the worst possible times.

17. *lava, pt. 1*

Tommy awoke sprawled on the ground. He remained perfectly still, taking in the hard dirt beneath his back and the scent of smoke and gunpowder. He was either back at the Sixteenth. . . or exile.

“Tommy?”

Exile, then. He cracked his eyes open, squinting at the bright sky. His vision was partially obscured by Dream, who was leaning over him, mask pushed to one side and face etched with concern.

“Hey,” he croaked, pushing himself into a sitting position. There was a faint ringing in his ears. He shook his head, trying to clear it, and caught sight of the crater by his feet in the process.

Dream grimaced, offering him a hand. Tommy accepted it and let himself be pulled up, then dusted himself off before he turned to run an eye over Logstedshire.

It was still intact. Looks like the crater had been one of Dream’s customary ‘time-to-traumatize-Tommy’ moments, not him blowing Logstedshire sky-high in a fit of rage.

“So,” Dream said, shuffling awkwardly. He looked uncomfortable. Which was very understandable, because That Feeling When You Get Thrown Back In Time Into A Situation Where You Were A Massive Jerk and all that.

Dream usually deferred to Tommy when they woke up mid-exile, probably out of some sort of guilt, which meant it was up to Tommy to break the tension. And, well, he’d been wanting to do this for a while. He was standing about two feet away from a pile of logs, too. Perfect.

“The floor is lava!” He called, then hopped onto the logs, balancing precariously on the stack. “Five, four, three--”

Dream was already moving, automatically latching onto the wooden wall like a monkey and pulling himself up. When he realized what he was doing, he stopped, turning his head to stare down at Tommy.

“What,” he deadpanned.

Tommy grinned. "Idea, big man. Loop zero, but anytime someone says 'the floor is lava', we gotta get off the floor in five seconds. First person to burn in lava loses."

Dream narrowed his eyes. "You're on."

23. lava, pt. 2

Dream hummed, turning in a slow circle as he took in Technoblade's house. "Well, I know Tommy's here," he said casually.

Technoblade froze. "Um. No, uh, no he's not."

Dream stared at him for a long moment before he sighed, turning away. "Well, it doesn't matter. I just came here to say one thing."

Technoblade narrowed his eyes, hand drifting towards the sword in his inventory. "And that is. . .?"

Dream smirked, then hopped onto Technoblade's ladder and hung there with one hand. "The floor is lava. Five. . ."

Tommy, hidden with an invisibility potion, silently spewed every single curse word he could think of as he clambered onto a crate while trying to stay as silent as possible. The crate shook dangerously but held under his weight, and Tommy sent up a mental thanks to Prime that it didn't creak. Technoblade stared at Dream with a befuddled expression. "What are you doing?"

"Two, one," Dream finished, then shot Technoblade a grin. "Just a little inside joke. Don't worry about it."

Technoblade blinked slowly. "'The floor is lava'?"

"Yup." Dream dropped back onto the ground, then brushed imaginary dust off his shoulder. "Well, I'm off."

Tommy waited until the door swung shut, then slid off the crate. "That *bastard*," he seethed.

Technoblade slowly turned to him. "You gonna explain?"

Tommy ignored him, instead heading over to one of Technoblade's chests. He pulled the lid up. Ah, golden apples. Perfect.

"Hey, what are you-- no, put that-- Tommy, that's *my* gapple, you can't just--"

29. lava, pt. 3

“Give it to me, Tubbo,” Dream commanded.

That was his cue. Tommy charged into the ruined community house, grimacing as the water left his clothes sopping wet. “NO!” he shouted. “NO, NO, DON’T--”

“Tommy?!” Tubbo cried, turning to him. Tommy hastily downed a cup of milk, shuddering at the tingling sensation of the invisibility potion wearing off. “What-- what are you doing here?!”

“Tubbo,” he greeted, then turned to Dream. “. . . Dream.”

“Tommy,” Dream returned, his face hidden behind his mask. “Would you like to explain yourself?”

Tommy scowled. “I didn’t blow up the fucking community house,” he protested. “Does this look like something I would do?!”

“*Yes!*” Dream snapped. “Yes, it does. You burned down George’s house--”

“Everyone here has grieved before!”

“--you snuck in here when you were supposed to stay in exile, and then you blew up the community house!”

“You have no proof, bitch!”

“Your past is plenty of proof! Who else would do something like this?!”

There was a moment of tense silence. The two glared at each other, neither willing to back down.

Tommy drew himself to his full height. “Dream,” he said coldly. People leaned forward, waiting in gleeful or anticipative silence.

“. . . The floor is lava.”

“Prime fucking damnit,” Dream cursed, hastily hopping into the waterfall and paddling to keep himself afloat. “I knew you would do it, you little shit, I *knew*-- ”

Tommy flipped him off. “Shut the fuck up, you green bastard. This is payback for Technoblade’s house--”

“--need to keep you on your toes--”

“--that’s the lamest excuse I’ve heard in twenty years--”

“--not as lame as loop 317--”

“--you said we’d never speak of it again!”

“*You* said we wouldn’t,” Dream chirped, still treading water. “I never agreed.”

Tommy kicked him out of the waterfall.

47. *lava, pt. 4*

Tommy stared out at the crater that lay before him. Clouds gathered in the sky, heavy with rain.

The first time, he'd felt anger. So much anger, and grief, and hatred for Dream and Philza and Technoblade.

Now, after seeing L'Manberg destroyed for the hundredth time, he just felt numb. It would get fixed by the next reset, anyways. There was no point wasting time feeling bad about it.

But Ghostbur. No matter how many times he looped, Ghostbur's reaction always shook him to the core. The ghost was floating at the edge of the crater, blank-faced, streaks of blue dripping down his cheeks.

"I take it back," he said quietly. *"Tommy, I take it back. I . . . I want you to bring me back to life."*

Tommy swallowed. "Ghostbur. . ."

Ghostbur turned to him, face still horribly expressionless. More blue welled in his colorless eyes. *"It's gone, Tommy. It's all gone."*

"Don't. . ." Tommy croaked. His mouth was dry. "It's going to be okay, Ghostbur. It's not. . . L'Manberg is gone, but the people are still here. As long as we're alive, as long as we're here, L'Manberg will live on."

"It's not the same," Ghostbur whispered.

"It's not," Tommy agreed quietly. "But it's something."

Tubbo snorted to his left, eyeing the smoking crater. "Better than nothing, right?" he asked with a touch of bitterness. Ranboo, standing a little ways behind him, shifted uneasily and said nothing.

"Fuck Dream," Quackity muttered. He looked up at the obsidian grid above them. "Fuck Technoblade. Fuck Philza."

"It's not the end," Tommy snapped. "We'll fuckin' survive."

"L'Manberg is a *hole in the ground*, Tommy!" Tubbo shouted, rounding on him. "This is the third time it's been destroyed. It's gone. Dead!"

"But *we're* alive, aren't we?!" Tommy shot back. "They killed our country but we're still here! Live to spite them, for fuck's sake! Don't give up!"

“I’m not giving up!” Tubbo snapped.

“Good!”

“*Good!*”

A long moment of silence followed the abrupt conclusion of their not-quite-argument. And then a voice sounded from high above them, causing several people to start in surprise. “The floor is lava!”

A pause. “Oh, *fuck you*, ” Tommy swore with vitriol, slamming down two blocks and hopping onto them. “Seriously. Fuck. You. I hope you break your arm.”

Dream cackled, lounging on the obsidian grid hanging over L’Manberg. “We did agree that we could do it anytime,” he called. “What better time than after destroying your country?”

“I hate you,” Tommy seethed. “You’re an absolute fucking *bastard*-- ”

“Thanks for the compliment, *child*-- ” Dream shrieked in surprise as an arrow went whistling past his face. “HEY!”

“What the fuck?” Quackity asked nobody in particular. Dream beat a hasty retreat as Tommy reloaded his crossbow.

53. *lava, pt. 5*

“Say goodbye,” Dream ordered, twisting the axe in his grip. Tubbo locked eyes with Tommy, a defeated smile on his face.

“No,” Tommy protested weakly. “You. . . you can’t. . .”

The Ender portal set into the wall behind them hummed. Except instead of Punz, *Ranboo* crashed through, eyes wide with panic.

“THE FLOOR IS LAVA!” he screamed.

Both loopers were already moving, Dream practically *throwing* Tubbo and his axe away in his haste to tower up. Meanwhile, Tommy, who had nothing in his inventory and therefore couldn’t tower, sprinted across the room to the hallway where the pets were kept and hopped onto Henry’s fence. Tubbo was left standing in the middle of the room, holding Dream’s axe with a bewildered expression on his face.

“Oh thank Prime it worked,” Ranboo breathed as the others began pouring out of the portal behind him.

Dream froze at the top of his tower, eyes narrowed. He pointed at Ranboo. “Wait,” he said. “What?”

“*What?*” Tommy repeated, wobbling precariously on top of the fence. “That’s-- you said-- *what?*”

“It’s okay, Tommy,” Sam soothed, leaving the crowd that had gathered in front of the portal and approaching Tommy. He raised his hands in a sort of calming gesture, like Tommy was a cornered animal. “You can come down from the fence now.”

“What the fuck,” Tommy said blankly. He did not come down from the fence. “You-- Ranboo-- what--”

“We needed a way to stop him from killing Tubbo,” Ranboo called, a sheepish look on his face. “I heard Techno muttering about Dream acting weird and ‘the floor is lava’, and then when I put that together with what happened at the Community House and on Doomsday, I realized that you were playing a game of some kind. So, uh, when I realized Dream had, um, an axe to Tubbo’s neck, I kinda. . .”

“Panicked and hoped we’d react automatically?” Tommy asked dryly.

Ranboo grimaced. “Basically. Yeah.”

“I’m impressed,” Dream said slowly. Everyone else in the room instantly leveled him with glares. He winced and raised his hands. “Shutting up now.”

“It’s over, Dream,” Sapnap snapped. He pointed his axe at the man balancing at the top of his tower. “Give up and get down here.”

“I can’t go down there,” Dream said petulantly. “The floor is still lava.”

There was a moment of disbelieving silence.

“Oh for *fuck’s sake*,” Sapnap snarled. He slammed down a block and began towering up. Dream yelped and scrambled as far away from the other man as he could. Which wasn’t very far, because he was literally standing on a one-block tower.

Sapnap was soon level with him. The man jabbed a sword in his direction. “Come. Down. Now.”

“Okay, okay!” Dream practically shrieked, scrambling off the tower and landing in a crouch on the floor. “I’m down! I’m down!”

“HA!” Tommy screamed. “I WIN, BITCH!”

“FUCK OFF!” Dream shouted back. “SAPNAP MADE ME, IT DOESN’T COUNT!”

“NO RULES AGAINST THAT!”

“THIS IS CHEATING--”

“YOU’RE GOING TO JAIL, YOUR OPINION IS INVALID.”

“THAT MAKES NO SENSE!”

“YOUR FACE MAKES NO SENSE!”

Tubbo interrupted the argument by stalking up to Dream and shoving his own axe under his chin. Dream yelped and rapidly backpedaled, throwing up his arms in the universal ‘I surrender’ gesture. “Woah woah woah wait! Don’t kill me, don’t kill me--”

Tubbo stalked after him as he retreated. “Why shouldn’t I?” he demanded, slightly hysterical. “You’ve-- you’ve caused so much hurt, so much-- all of this-- L’Manberg, everything, it was your fault! Why shouldn’t I just kill you right now?!”

“Because I can bring people back to life!” Dream shouted. Tubbo froze. “If I die, then death is permanent!”

Tubbo lowered his axe. “You. . . you can bring people back to life?”

“Yes,” Dream confirmed. “. . . Schlatt. . . Schlatt gave me a book. A revive book. I can bring Wilbur back to life, but if you kill me. . .”

Tubbo glanced back at the crowd, conflicted. Tommy huffed and decided to speed the process along.

“Oi, Dream,” he called. “You were buildin’ a prison or some shit, right? Why don’t we just lock you up in there?”

“That’s. . . actually a good idea,” Sam muttered.

“Oi, what’s that supposed to mean?!”

Sam realized how he’d phrased it. “Wait, no I didn’t mean it like that--”

Tommy scowled and crossed his arms, only to lose his balance. Sam lunged forward and managed to catch him before the floor. He grunted as Tommy began clambering up his back like a deranged koala.

“Ranboo!” Tommy shouted in panic. “RANBOO! COUNT DOWN FIVE, THE FLOOR IS STILL LAVA!”

“What?” Ranboo asked blankly.

“COUNT DOWN FROM FIVE, YOU BITCH!”

“Please,” Sam added, hunched over and struggling to maintain his balance with Tommy half-hanging off his back.

“Uh, five four three two one?”

The moment Ranboo reached one, Tommy let out a sigh of relief, releasing his hold on Sam. Unfortunately, his foot had gotten tangled in one of Sam’s armor straps, and he pulled the

creeper hybrid down with him. They both went crashing to the floor.

“Karma,” Dream called from down the hallway. Tommy wiggled one arm out from under Sam and flipped him off.

the adventures of dreaxter

Chapter Summary

TLDR: Dream dies in prison and comes back as a ghost with (fake) memory problems and a strange obsession with glitter. Fear Him. Meanwhile, Sapnap and George search for answers as to how he died.

Dreaxter goes baking with Niki and discovers edible glitter. He (with Tommy's help) then covers Las Nevadas with edible glitter. Then he visits the prison and talks to the Warden, who refuses to tell him how he died. Dream unlocks a disturbing new appearance (prison jumpsuit, green blood, etc.), and runs to Tommy, who helps him calm down. They then return to the prison to find Sapnap and George arguing with Antfrost and Bad, who won't let them enter. And then Quackity shows up. Dream flees after accidentally turning back into his Scary Form. Antfrost, Bad, Quackity, Sapnap, and George enter the prison. Q disappears somewhere along the way; Bad, Sapnap, & George go to the main cell - where they discover that Dream was tortured during his time in prison. The party then heads off to interrogate Sam, who's hiding in the surveillance room. Sam outs Q as the killer. Sapnap and George go to hunt Q down. While running away, Q stumbles across Dreaxter. He yells at him for a bit, only to be interrupted by Tommy. (cont. in notes)

Chapter Notes

Tommy stalls him until Sapnap and George arrive. They knock Quackity out and take him (and Sam) to stand trial.

24. *the adventures of dreaxter, pt. 1* (credit to *curry_powder* and *Silver_Melody*)

“Dreaxter?” Tommy demanded. “What kind of fucking name is *Dreaxter*?”

“*Dream and Specter*,” Dream huffed, crossing his arms. “*You went with Toast, you have no room to judge.*”

“But *Dreaxter*?” Tommy wrinkled his nose. “Why didn’t you go with like-- ‘Ghream’ or something?”

Dream shuddered. “*Look, I know we’re going for cursed names, but I have standards.*”

Tommy considered that. “Okay, yeah, if someone was calling me Ghommy every day I’d probably flip and go polterjest on them.”

“Poltergeist.”

“That’s what I said.”

“No, you pronounce it ‘polter-giest.”

“It’s ‘polter-jest.””

“‘Test’, like heist but with a g.”

“Nuh-uh. I’m right, you’re wrong, end of discussion.”

Dream buried his face in his hands. *“Tommy--”*

“Dream?”

Both loopers turned to see Sapnap, who was standing on the path and staring at them. *“Sapnap!”* Dream exclaimed. *“Tell Tommy that it’s pronounced polter-giest, not polter-jest!”*

Sapnap took a step back. “Dream,” he said weakly. “Dream, you’re-- you’re a ghost.”

“Yup! My name’s Dreaxter!”

“How. . .” Sapnap choked out. Dream blinked.

“Are you okay?”

Sapnap shook his head. “I-- no, Dream, how did you die?”

Dream’s smile dimmed. *“Don’t remember much,”* he said distantly. *“I was cold, and tired. Really tired.”*

Sapnap stared at him and said nothing. Dream shook himself, smile reappearing. *“But anyway, tell Tommy that he’s pronouncing it wrong.”*

“I am *not* pronouncing it wrong,” Tommy protested. “*You’re* the one pronouncing it wrong. You’re projecting your flaws onto me.”

Dream’s face twisted. *“That’s not-- that’s not how projection works.”*

They both looked over at a strangled sound. Sapnap had his face pressed in his hands. His breathing was uneven, as though he was struggling to keep himself calm. Dream drifted closer.

“Sapnap? Are you okay?”

Sapnap let out a humorless laugh. “Am I-- *no*, Dream--Dreaxter, I’m not, what the *fuck--*”

“Are you sad?” the ghost asked. He produced a fistful of. . . something from his hoodie pocket. *“Here, have some glitter.”*

Sapnap shook his head. “I don’t-- wait, *glitter?*”

In answer, Dream threw whatever he was holding in Sapnap’s face. Sapnap flinched back and shut his eyes, arms coming up to protect his head from whatever projectile Dream had just tossed at him. When several long seconds had passed and nothing hit him, he cautiously opened one eye.

Dream beamed at him, hair dusted with glitter. “*Glitter,*” he affirmed. “*Glitter makes me happy.*”

Tommy began coughing loudly, almost like he was trying not to laugh. Sapnap paid him no mind, instead lowering his arms and glancing down at himself. Sure enough, he was covered in glitter. Shiny, silver-green glitter. He looked back up at Dreaxter.

The ghost shuffled awkwardly, a motion that didn’t quite translate without legs. “*Do you feel better?*” he asked.

The look on Sapnap’s face shifted from ‘angsty inner turmoil’ to ‘what the fuck’. “Is-- is your glitter like Ghostbur’s blue or something?” he asked, sounding slightly hysterical.

“Yes,” Dreaxter lied. Not that Sapnap needed to know it was a lie. He wasn’t about to give up an opportunity to toss glitter in peoples’ faces. “*Do you want more?*”

“Uh.” Sapnap ran a hand through his hair, then grimaced when it came away coated with glitter. “I’m good, thanks.”

“*You don’t look good.*”

“I’m fine,” Sapnap insisted.

Dreaxter reluctantly put away the handful of glitter he had pulled out. “. . . *Okay, if you say so.*”

Tommy’s coughing devolved into full-on cackling.

28. *the adventures of dreaxter, pt. 2 (credit to curry_powder)*

“*Where are we going?*”

Sapnap didn’t look back. “Kinoko Kingdom,” he replied shortly. Tommy, trailing after him, made a face at his back.

“The fuck is a kincoco?” he asked.

“*Kinoko,*” Sapnap corrected. “It’s an anime character.”

“*An anime character?*” Dream faked a confused look. “*Are they the ruler of the kingdom?*”

“I-- no. She’s mushroom-themed, though.”

“Then why did you name it Kinoko Kingdom?” They stepped through the nether portal and into the island nation. “. . . *Oh. It’s mushroom-themed too!*”

They entered the Kingdom with little fanfare. As they rounded one of the buildings, a man came into view, dressed in a multicolor hoodie.

“Karl!” Sapnap called. Karl jumped, snapping the book he was holding shut and stuffing it into his inventory.

“Sapnap! Don’t scare me like that!” He turned to the group. “What’s-- *Dream?!?*”

Dream waved. *“Hi, I’m Dreaxter!”*

Karl stared at him for a long moment. “You’re-- you’re a ghost.”

“I am,” Dream agreed.

Karl took a step back. “You’re *a ghost.*”

Dream nodded slowly. *“Yes, we just established that.”*

“You’re not supposed to be a ghost!” Karl protested, only to grimace and duck his head like he’d said something he wasn’t supposed to. “I-- sorry, nevermind. Just. How? How did you die?”

Dream fiddled with his ghostly fingers. *“It was cold,”* was all he said.

Tommy pushed his way to the front of the group. “We’re looking for Gogy,” he said. “Do you know where he is?”

Karl stared at him like he’d just noticed him. “Tommy? Why. . . why are you with Dream?”

“He’s nicer like this,” Tommy said. Because Dream was standing at the very back of the group, Karl was the only one that saw him flip Tommy off.

“R-right,” the man stammered. “Well, uh, I-- I think George’s in that house?” he pointed at a small mushroom-themed house down the street. “He was sleeping there a couple hours ago. I’m not sure if he already left.”

Sapnap snorted. “Probably not,” he said, voice tinged with bitterness. Karl took one look at his face and opened his arms. Sapnap shuffled forward, burying his face in Karl’s shoulder as the other man wrapped him in a hug.

Tommy and Dream glanced at each other before moving away, giving the two fiances some space.

“Talk about third-wheeling,” Tommy grumbled. Dream shrugged, slightly subdued.

"Sapnap needs it," he said quietly. "I . . . I didn't think it would affect him this badly."

"Dude, you were his best friend."

"He promised he'd kill me if he ever saw me out of prison."

Tommy shot him an incredulous look. "That doesn't mean he'd be *happy* to see you dead!"

Dream said nothing, instead watching as Karl muttered something inaudible in Sapnap's ear.

Tommy sighed. ". . . How did you die, anyways?"

"Bled out," Dream said dryly. "Quackity didn't bring enough regen potions to fix the damage."

Tommy paused. "He didn't do that in loop zero."

"I may have intentionally tried to piss him off."

"What the fuck, Dream."

"Dreaxter."

"Shut the fuck up, bitch. I'll call you whatever I want." He hesitated. ". . . Are you okay?"

Dream grinned. *"No, but I will be after I glitter bomb Las Nevadas. Wanna help?"*

"Do you even need to ask?"

35. *the adventures of dreaxter, pt. 3*

"Dream," George whispered.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Dreaxter noted. Tommy choked on air. "And hi! I'm Dreaxter!"

"You're--" George shook himself. *"You're dead?"*

"Yes," Dreaxter said. "Why does everyone ask me that?"

"But-- you're supposed to be in prison," George protested weakly, sinking towards the floor.

"You were-- safe in prison. I don't-- I don't understand-- who killed you? How--?"

Dream tilted his head. *"Prison? Oh, is that the big blackstone building I woke up in?"*

"Yeah," Tommy cut in. "That's the prison."

Dreaxter hummed, brow furrowing. *"I don't think Dream was very safe there,"* was all he said. *"There was a lot of blood."*

George paled further and sank the remaining few inches to the floor.

“Okay, that’s it,” Sapnap growled. He turned on his heel and stormed towards the door.

“Woah woah woah, big man,” Tommy said, sliding in front of him. “Where are you going?”

“To find answers,” Sapnap snapped. “Get out of my way.”

“Wait,” George blurted. He scrambled to his feet. “Wait, I’m coming with you.”

Dreaxter tilted his head. “*What’s happening?*”

“We’re going to find out what happened to you,” Sapnap promised.

Dreaxter blinked. “. . . *Why?*”

His former friend stared at him for a long moment, then gritted his teeth and turned away. He shoved past Tommy and out of the house. George followed. The door slammed shut behind them.

“. . . Are you siccing Sapnap on Quackity and Sam?” Tommy asked.

“*Maybe,*” Dreaxter admitted. “*I might be a bit salty that nobody ever found out what happened to me in the prison.*”

“Right, like you *might* hold a *bit* of a grudge against Quackity.”

“*Exactly.*”

38. *the adventures of dreaxter, pt. 4*

“Niki!”

Niki Nihachu stopped in her tracks, but didn’t turn around. “Tommy,” she greeted stiffly.

“Hey, Niki,” Tommy said. He paused for a moment. “Uh. . . how you doin’?”

“Good,” the woman replied shortly. She turned around to look at him. “Why are you talking to me, Tommy?”

Tommy looked taken aback. “Uh. . . I guess, I guess I wanted to ask you something?”

A long moment of silence. “Well?” Niki asked. She wouldn’t have been this short with him normally, but her failed attempt on his life had been weighing on her for a while now. “What is it?”

Tommy grimaced. “Uh, Dreaxter!”

A glowing ghost popped his head out from behind a building. “Hi,” he said.

Niki stared at him. “*Dream?*”

“No, *I’m Dreaxter*,” Dream corrected. “*You’re Niki, right?*”

“I-- yes,” Niki confirmed, still staring at him. “You’re a ghost. How did-- how did you die?”

Dreaxter shrugged. “*Don’t remember. Sapnap’s trying to figure it out.*”

“Anyways,” Tommy cut in, “Dream-- sorry, *Dreaxter*-- wanted to meet you.”

“*You bake, right?*” Dreaxter asked cheerily.

Niki bit her lip. “I. . . I haven’t baked in a while. . .”

Dreaxter shrugged. “*But you used to?*”

“Yes?”

The ghost shuffled his nonexistent feet. “. . . *could you teach me?*”

Niki blinked. “Why?”

“*It’s a . . . personal mission, I guess,*” Dreaxter explained. “*I don’t really remember what happened, but I heard that Dream was a--*”

“Bitch,” Tommy chirped.

“*--bad person,*” Dreaxter continued without missing a beat. “*He hurt a lot of people, and, um, I guess I wanted to make up for it? And, and people like gifts, right? I think if. . . I know cupcakes won’t make up for what Dream did, but. . .*”

Niki hesitated, gaze darting between Tommy and the ghost. “I. . .”

“*Please?*” Dreaxter drifted closer. “*I really wanna learn!*”

“Laying it on a bit thick there, big man,” Tommy muttered. He pulled his communicator out of his pocket and checked the time. “Oh shit, gotta go. I promised Tubbo I’d do this thing for him.”

It was a complete lie - he hadn’t talked to Tubbo in two days now - but he’d discovered a few hundred loops prior that Nikki didn’t exactly have a *positive* opinion of him at the moment. She’d probably be more amenable to teaching Dream if Tommy wasn’t hovering behind him. That being said, Dream had wanted to try baking for several loops now. Problem was, the only person on the server that could bake something decent was Niki, and during most loops he never got a chance to ask her. Sometimes, he couldn’t get into Manburg; sometimes, he was a criminal on the run; sometimes, Niki hated his guts.

Now, though, Manburg was gone. He was a ghost; the server wouldn't try to throw him back into prison, and Niki would believe she had no real reason to hate him. Being dead also gave him a plausible explanation for an action that would have been viewed with suspicion had he still been alive.

Niki stared at him. Dream kept an earnest expression on his face, which wasn't very difficult considering that he *genuinely* wanted to learn.

It paid off. “. . . Alright,” Niki acquiesced at last, turning away. “I'll just. . . we can use my kitchen, I suppose. Just give me a moment to gather my supplies.”

“*Yes!*” Dreaxter cheered, doing a flip midair. “*Thank you!*”

“Careful,” Niki warned. Dreaxter narrowed his eyes, struggling to pour the vanilla extract into the spoon. His focus slipped for a moment and his hands became halfway incorporeal, the extract splashing onto the floor.

“*Sorry.*”

“No, no, it's fine,” Niki assured. “Making messes is a part of the baking process. Did you get it?”

“*Yeah.*” Dream held up the teaspoon of vanilla extract. “*Do I just. . . pour it in?*”

“You got it.”

Dream tipped the vanilla extract into the bowl. “*Okay, now what?*”

“Well, now you have to mix it. . .”

“*Um,*” Dreaxter said, staring at the sink. “*I-- I can't wash my hands. The water makes them melt.*”

Niki paused, then grabbed a towel off a nearby rack and handed it to him. “Wipe your hands with this.”

Dream obediently cleaned his hands with the towel. It got most of the cocoa powder and flour off. The vegetable oil, however, remained. The ghost stared at his hands for a long moment, then frowned and flexed his fingers. The oily sheen appeared to collapse in on itself as he went incorporeal, any substance on his ectoplasmic skin falling through him.

Niki stared at him for a long moment. “That’s. . . one way of doing it, I guess. Does it clean the germs off too?”

“I think so,” Dream replied truthfully. Niki offered him a small smile.

“Then it works. Come on, let’s put these in the oven.”

“Okay, now that they’re baking, let’s get started on the frosting.”

“Frosting?”

“Frosting,” Niki confirmed. “Could you go grab five eggs?”

“Okay!” Dreaxter stuck his hand through the chest lid, paused, withdrew it, and opened the chest like a normal human being. *“Right, um, five eggs.”*

He toted the eggs back over to Niki, carefully setting them down on a table. *“Now what?”*

“Now, we separate the yolk and the white.”

“Okay,” Dreaxter said. *“How?”*

Niki took an egg and demonstrated. Dream took an egg and tried to copy her. It broke on the kitchen floor. A chicken sprung up, squawked at them, and promptly began pecking at Niki’s ankles.

Dream sighed.

“Squeeze it carefully-- yes, exactly like that, you’re doing great! Okay, now turn the base-- gently, *gently*--”

Dreaxter raised the piping bag and looked at the lopsided dollop of frosting on his cupcake. *“How do you make it look so nice?”*

“Practice makes perfect,” Niki replied, setting her own perfectly-frosted cupcake aside. The chicken, which had been named Marshmallow, clucked from inside her cage and tried to peck at the pastry. “And you’re doing really good for your first time!”

Dreaxter beamed at her. Niki smiled back, then turned to the rest of the unfrosted cupcakes.

“Let’s frost the rest of these. I’ll do half, and you’ll do half?”

“*Okay!*”

“Do you want to add anything on top?”

“*On top?*”

“On top of the frosting.” Niki gestured to the array of jars sitting on the table. “I have chocolate chips, rainbow sprinkles, edible glitter. . .”

Dreaxter’s head snapped towards her. “*Edible glitter?*”

Niki giggled and slid a jar of silver glitter towards him. “Edible glitter,” she confirmed.

Dreaxter *smiled*.

“*I’m really sorry about the mess,*” Dreaxter apologized again as he dumped the dirty towel into the sink. Marshmallow, who had been moved into a pen in the corner, was now happily pecking away at some seeds. She looked up as Dreaxter passed by.

Niki waved him off. “Really, it’s fine! I nearly set my kitchen on fire the first time I tried baking. Besides, you helped me clean up.”

Dreaxter nodded hesitantly, then turned to the cupcakes. They sat on the counter in individual plastic boxes, ready to be delivered.

“*Thank you for teaching me,*” he said. “*I know you probably don’t like Dream, but you did this anyway.*”

“I don’t like Dream, but. . . you’re not him,” Niki admitted quietly. “And honestly, I haven’t had that much fun in a while. So thank *you* as well.”

Dream beamed, then shuffled over to the counter and selected one of the prettier cupcakes he had frosted. Unlike the rest, it only had a light dusting of edible glitter on top. “*Here,*” he chirped, turning back to her and holding it out. “*This one’s for you.*”

Niki laughed. “What, as a ‘sorry Dream was mean to you’ cupcake?”

“*As a ‘thank you for being my friend’ cupcake,*” Dreaxter replied firmly.

Niki paused. "Friend?"

Dreaxter shrugged. "*Friend, baking buddy. . .*"

Niki giggled. "Baking buddy?"

"*Yeah, we can be baking buddies! I wanna do this again sometime,*" the ghost admitted. "*If . . . if that's okay.*"

Niki's giggling softened into a smile. She dipped her head. "Of course. If you ever want to bake with me, just come find me, okay?"

"*Okay!*"

"*Tommy, I made you a cupcake!*"

Tommy turned around and caught the projectile hurtling towards his face out of reflex. He stared down at the plastic box, and the abomination inside of it.

Dream had dumped a frankly obscene amount of edible glitter into the frosting. The cupcake was less cake and more sugar. Tommy stared at it for a long moment, then looked up at Dream. ". . . Thanks, big man."

"*You're welcome!*" Dream chirped. "*Don't worry, the glitter's edible.*"

Tommy's eyes widened. "It's *edible*? Dream--"

"*I know,*" the ghost replied, a vicious grin spreading across his face. "*Time to think up some new pranks. We've got a casino owner to troll.*"

46. *the adventures of dreaxter, pt. 5 (credit to curry_powder)*

"Seriously," Tommy deadpanned. "Where the fuck do you get so much glitter?"

"*I said, I have my sources,*" Dream muttered, inspecting their handiwork. "*Wait, I think this spot needs a bit more.*"

"That's not an answer," Tommy grumbled. He stalked over, unscrewed another jar of edible glitter, and threw it all over the casino wall. "Do I even want to know?"

"Do you?" Dream returned unhelpfully. Tommy rolled his eyes as he screwed the jar lid back on, then surveyed their handiwork.

"Think we're done?"

"Unless you want to completely bury Las Nevadas, then yeah, I think this is enough."

"Pog."

"What the fuck?"

Teenager and ghost turned around to see Quackity staring at them. Tommy waved, realized he was still holding the incriminating jar, and hastily shoved it into his inventory. "Heyyyyy, big Q."

"What the fuck," Quackity repeated. He gestured at the casino wall, the ground beneath them, and at the Needle in the distance. All three, along with the rest of Las Nevadas, were blanketed in slightly sticky (for the vertical surfaces), edible glitter. "I-- what-- *did you do this?*"

"Nope," Tommy lied. "It was like this when we got here."

Quackity looked skeptical. Which was understandable, because as far as lies went, this wasn't exactly Tommy's finest. Thankfully, Dream chose that moment to step in.

"Quackity!" he chirped. The casino owner instantly went three shades paler. *"Hi! How're you doing?"*

"You're a ghost?" Quackity blurted, then shut his eyes and shook his head. "Fuck, of course you'd come back to haunt us."

"Hey, Dreaxter's not that bad," Tommy butted in. "Still kinda a bitch, but on the level of bitchiness, he's nowhere near Dream."

"Aw thanks, Tommy!" Dreaxter cheered, even as he sent Tommy a look that promised certain death. Tommy was completely unaffected, having long grown immune to The Look.

Quackity paused, a calculating look in his eyes. "You. . . you're not Dream?"

"No," the ghost denied vehemently. *"Dream was mean. Or, at least everyone told me he was. . ."*

"You don't remember what Dream did?"

Dreaxter shrugged. *"I forgot a lot of stuff. Speaking of, where did you get that scar? It looks really cool!"*

Tommy winced. Dreaxter really knew how to hit the wrong buttons.

Quackity's hands clenched and unclenched, like he was forcing himself to remain calm. "Thanks," he gritted out. Instead of answering Dream's question, he changed the subject. "So what the hell are you doing in Las Nevadas? Why the fuck did you cover everything with-- with glitter?"

"We didn't cover everything with glitter," Tommy protested. "I told you, it was already like that when we got here."

"Bullshit," Quackity deadpanned.

"I'm serious."

"Tommy, the two of you are *literally* the only ones here--"

"What, big Q, do you not exist?"

"You know what I fucking mean! And why the hell would I cover my own nation in glitter?!"

"It's a stylistic choice."

"For *fuck's sake*--"

Meanwhile, Dreaxter had wandered over to the casino wall. He stared at it for a long moment, then leaned forward and licked it. Quackity stuttered in the middle of his sentence and stopped to stare at the ghost.

Tommy noticed the pause. "What?" He followed his gaze. "Dreaxter, don't lick walls. It's bad for you."

Dreaxter shrugged and licked the casino wall again. Quackity made a noise like a dying seal.

"*The glitter tastes good,*" the ghost explained. "*I'm already dead, it's not like I'll get sick.*"

"What-- what the fuck," Quackity spluttered. "What the *fuck* is wrong with you."

"It's edible glitter. And I know that because I tried some of it, not because I was the one who put it there," Tommy clarified. "Definitely not me. Yeah."

Quackity just stared wordlessly at them, performing a human rendition of the Blue Screen of Death. Tommy laughed nervously and grabbed Dreaxter by the arm. "We'll be on our way now, big Q! Uh, big man things to do, people to traumatize-- nice talking to you seeyouaroundbye!"

64. *the adventures of dreaxter, pt. 6*

"SAM!" Sapnap shouted. He kicked the portal frame. "I KNOW YOU CAN HEAR US!"

George sighed. "Sapnap, that's not going to work."

“SAM, YOU FUCKING COWARD! ANSWER ME!”

“What are you doing?” Both men jolted, spinning around to see Dreaxter floating through the wall. The ghost was covered in a fine coating of glitter, flakes occasionally drifting to the floor. He glanced at the portal frame, then back at Sapnap. *“Why are you yelling at a wall?”*

“It’s a portal,” Sapnap answered. “Currently deactivated, because the wARDEN IS TOO SCARED TO GIVE ME SOME FUCKING ANSWERS!”

Dreaxter watched curiously as Sapnap kicked the portal frame again. *“I can go look for him if you want,”* he offered. *“The walls don’t stop me.”*

Sapnap paused, studying him with an unreadable gaze. He glanced at George, who shrugged, then looked back to Dream.

“I don’t know,” he began. “You. . . it might bring up some bad memories.”

Dreaxter shook his head. *“I’ve been all over the server and I haven’t remembered anything new,”* he assured. *“I’m sure it’ll be fine!”*

He moved towards the portal, only for Sapnap to step in his way. “Are you sure about this?” he asked seriously. Dream nodded.

“Mhm! Don’t worry, I’ll let Sam know that you wanna talk.”

And then he was gone, disappearing into the wall behind the empty portal frame.

“Woahhhh,” Dream muttered, running an incorporeal hand over the redstone contraption and leaving a trail of glitter behind. He’d seen the inner workings of Pandora’s Vault maybe only two or three times before, and they amazed him every time. Heck, he’d probably even have dedicated several loops to studying it if he didn’t have so much bad history with this place.

Turning away, he poked his head through another wall, grimacing when he realized he was overlooking the moat. *“Wrong way,”* he muttered, retreating back into the building and glancing around. *“Hmm. . .”*

He floated over to another wall and stuck his head through, grinning triumphantly when he came out into a hallway. Perfect! Now he just needed to figure out *which* hallway.

Gliding down the hall and through a locked door, he found a spiral staircase. Dream ran the prison blueprints through his head. Okay, so he was on the second floor. He had no idea where Sam was, but he would probably be in one of the guards-only rooms. If he remembered correctly, the locker rooms would be right up ahead.

He phased through the next door and found himself in the locker room. One of the lockers was thrown open, netherite gear and miscellaneous items scattered about the floor. It was also conspicuously absent of one prison warden.

“*Huh,*” he muttered, then continued on. He passed into an equipping room, which was also empty of any living beings, then paused, glancing between the two exits.

The one to his left led to a long hallway and a security monitoring room. The one to his right led to the main cell.

Dream hesitated. Sam was probably in the monitoring room, but. . .

He turned right.

Slipping through the door, he entered a short hallway that opened into a large room with lever-lined walls. Straight across from him was a wall of lava, obscuring the entrance to the cell where he had died. He stared into the waves of yellow and orange and wondered if it would affect him the same way water did. Did it hurt? If he walked into it, would he burn to death, like he had so many times in this very building?

An odd, cold feeling rose in his chest. When Dream looked down, his hands were stained with dark green, fingers bent oddly and fingernails torn off. He flexed them, frowning when the action failed to cause him any pain. It was probably just a matter of appearance, then.

“Dr-Dream?”

“*Sam!*” Dreaxter whirled around, beaming. The green vanished from his uninjured hands. “*There you are! I’ve been looking for you!*”

The warden went pale, staggering back a few steps. The trident dropped from his numb fingers. Dreaxter frowned. “*Are you okay?*”

Sam’s laugh bordered on the edge of hysterical. “Am I-- no, no, Dream, you can’t-- what are you doing here?”

“*My name’s Dreaxter,*” Dreaxter corrected. “*Sapnap wanted to talk to you, but you weren’t answering, so I came up here to tell you. Are you okay? You don’t look okay. Here, have some glitter.*”

Before Sam could react, the ghost had drifted up to him and dropped a handful of glitter over his head. The warden tried to bat him away on instinct, but his hands swished right through Dreaxter’s incorporeal form. The ghost drifted back, frowning.

“*Do you feel better now?*” he asked.

Sam looked down at himself. His head and shoulders were now dusted with glitter. “You just threw glitter at me,” he said, sounding bewildered.

Dreaxter nodded. “*I did.*”

“ . . . Why?”

“Because glitter makes people happy!” Dreaxter beamed, doing a twirl to showcase his glitter-covered hoodie. *“See? I’ve got lots, so I’m really happy!”*

“It’s like Ghostbur’s Blue,” Sam realized. He sounded. . . off, shaky, his words a bit too breathy. Dreaxter tilted his head, taking a moment to really *look* at him.

Sam looked - for lack of a better term - like a mess. His hair was a rat’s nest, his eyebags had eyebags, and he was almost as pale as Dreaxter.

“When was the last time you saw the sun?”

Sam startled. “What?”

“When was the last time you saw the sun?” the ghost repeated. *“You look terrible.”*

Sam laughed. The sound was edged with hysteria. “It’s-- been a while,” he choked out, pressing a hand to his face. “Prime. *Prime*, Dream. How much do you remember?”

“Dreaxter,” the ghost corrected automatically. *“Not a lot. I remember making the server, I think. You were there, with Sapnap and George, and Bad, and. . . and. . .”* his brow furrowed. *“I can’t remember. Tommy says I’ve forgotten a lot.”*

Sam jerked. “Tommy? You’re-- you know Tommy?”

“He’s my friend,” Dream said. Sam shuddered, looking slightly sick. *“But anyway, I came here because. . . because Sapnap wanted to talk to you! I remember that. He’s been trying to call you for a while. And, and I came up here to tell you.”*

“I know,” Sam said shortly.

Dreaxter blinked. *“You. . . know?”*

Sam turned away and began heading back down the hall. “Yes.”

“Wait, wait, what?” The ghost hurried after him. *“Then why didn’t you answer him?”*

“Because I don’t want to talk to him.”

Dreaxter frowned. *“ . . . Why?”*

Sam slowed as they entered another room, weighing his answer. “It’s a long story,” he said at last.

“I have time.”

Sam exhaled sharply. “It’s. . . you don’t want to know, Dream. Sorry. Dreaxter.”

Dreaxter worried his bottom lip, looking contemplative. *“Then. . . will you tell me, at least?”*

Sam stopped in his tracks. “Tell you what?”

“You know. How, um, how I died.”

Several long seconds ticked by. “. . . You don’t remember,” Sam said softly.

“Not a lot,” Dreaxter admitted. *“I know I was cold, but. . .”*

Sam abruptly started moving again, swifter this time. Dreaxter yelped. *“Wait, Sam! Where are you going?!”*

“You don’t want to know how you died,” Sam answered, his eyes fixed on the door at the end of the hall.

“I think I do, actually,” the ghost protested.

“No,” The warden gritted out, pressing his keycard against a scanner. The door unlocked with a click and he pushed it open, stepping into the monitoring room. “Just. Don’t ask.”

“Wait, Sam, I just want to know--”

“Goodbye, Dream.”

Sam shut the door. Dreaxter stared at it for a long moment, the glitter dusting his hands and hair fading away. His form began to flicker, fading between a torn prison jumpsuit and his customary hoodie.

Silently, he turned and floated away.

121. *the adventures of dreaxter, pt. 7 (credit to Black_as_White)*

TW: Implied/Referenced Torture

Tommy plucked halfheartedly at the weeds, glaring at them like they’d personally offended him. “Build a hotel, they said. It’ll be fun, they said.” He yanked a dandelion out with unnecessary force. “But noooo, I have to pull the *same fucking weeds a hundred fucking times!*”

“Tommy,” an echoey voice said behind him. Tommy groaned, throwing his weeds down and turning around.

“Hey Dream, whhhAT THE FUCK!”

The ghost offered him a wan smile. The vibrant bruises on his cheek scrunched disturbingly. *“Yeah. I got a wardrobe upgrade.”*

“What the *fuck*,” Tommy repeated, voice reaching a squeak. “Go back, undo, whatever the fuck just-- no!”

"I don't know how."

Tommy pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes and took a few deep breaths. Then he looked Dream over, forcing himself not to flinch back at the sight of the orange jumpsuit. "Okay," he breathed. "Okay. What happened?"

Dream flickered like a shaky TV signal. When he stabilized, several ugly gashes had opened up along his arm. *"I talked to Sam."*

"Right, that'll do it." Tommy's eyes drifted to the green blood staining his sleeve. "Are you okay?"

"It doesn't hurt."

Tommy bit the inside of his cheek. "Not what I was asking."

"... Yes. No. I don't know." Dream twisted his fingers together. Tommy cringed as they cracked loudly. *"Listen, I-- I need to change back. George and Sapnap are waiting for me-- Sam wouldn't talk to them, so they sent me into the prison to find him, but if I don't get back soon-- I can't let them see me like this and I didn't know what to do, so I just--"*

"Went looking for me."

"Yes."

"Right, okay. Right. Um--" Tommy wracked his brain. "Maybe it's connected to your emotions or some shit? You gotta calm down, man."

The ghost scowled at him. The mask pushed to the side of his head cracked, a smear of dark green creeping up the edge. *"I would if I knew how!"*

Tommy was half-tempted to say 'breathing exercises', but one look at Dream's glowing eyes was enough to tell him that they wouldn't work this time. Instead he said, "I wanna redecorate the prison."

Dream blinked. *"...What?"*

"I wanna redecorate the prison," Tommy repeated. "Next time we loop in after the final confrontation, we're taking creative liberties. With or without Sam's permission."

"I..." Dream frowned. *"What would you do with it?"*

"Make everything pink. Baker-Miller pink. Scientifically proven to reduce aggression, and Sam could use some help with that." Tommy eyed Dream's hoodie, which was conspicuously glitter-free. "And add glitter. A ton of that shit, just-- everywhere. Pile it up in the corners so people step in it and get glitter all over themselves."

Dream's form stabilized, flickering edges solidifying once more. *"Wouldn't that just make him more frustrated?"*

“But it would be funny. His *face*, Dream, remember that one time we replaced the lava with glue--”

“The time with the feathers, or the time with the catnip?”

“I was thinking about the feathers, but the catnip one was fuckin’ *hilarious*.” Tommy snickered, relaxing slightly as Dream’s fingers straightened out. “Highest-security prison on the server, and it couldn’t hold up against *cats*.”

“To be fair, they were invincible cats. And motivated by catnip.”

“But *cats*! It took Technoblade a *month* to put together a plan to get you out, and the cats did it in three hours!”

Dream chuckled. The dark green receded and the gashes stitched themselves up. When Tommy blinked, the ghost was back in his hoodie - slightly ragged, but a massive improvement from the jumpsuit.

“Better?”

“Better,” Dream confirmed. He ducked his head. *“Sorry, I didn’t expect. . . I should be over it by now--”*

“Shut the fuck up. You have a right to be mad, so stop worrying about it.” Tommy barreled on before Dream could protest. “You need to head back now, right?”

“Yeah.” Dream sent him a wry smile that told him he knew *exactly* what Tommy was doing. *“Mind helping me? I can’t seem to remember how I got here.”*

“Fuck your stupid ghost-amnesia bullshit,” Tommy muttered, but he turned on his heel and strode down the path. “If I somehow end up in the prison *again*, I’m blaming you.”

“You’ll be fine!”

“--and we’re not leaving until he comes out and talks to us--”

“For the last time, Sapnap!” Bad’s tail lashed back and forth, nearly whacking Antfrost across the knees. “We can’t let you in! There’s no point in waiting out here-- just go home.”

Sapnap bared his teeth, eyes glowing dangerously. “Look, *dad*,” --Bad flinched back-- “I don’t care if Sam sent you guys out to chase us away. We’re not budging until we get some answers.”

“To *what*?” Antfrost demanded. “What could you possibly need to see Sam for?”

“To know why Dream’s *dead!*”

Both guards recoiled. “*Dead?*” Bad echoed, eyes widening. “I-- what? No, Sam would have told us if he. . .”

George crossed his arms. “Well, he obviously didn’t.”

Antfrost shook his head. “Look, even if Dream is dead we can’t let you in. Warden’s orders.”

Sapnap snarled and took a step forward, only to stop in his tracks when a voice rang through the entrance hall. “Uh. . . bad time?”

Tommy stepped into the hall. He winced as four wary gazes fell on him. “I’m just, uh, bringing Dreaxter back.”

As if on cue, the ghost floated into view. He beamed. “*George! Sapnap!*”

Sapnap blinked, ignoring the choked noise Bad made behind him. “Dream, what-- I thought you were looking for Sam?”

“*I was! I found him, actually, and. . .*” the ghost frowned. “*I think I told him you were outside? He wouldn’t go out, so I asked him how I. . . how I. . . don’t. . .*” he shook his head. “*Anyway, I blinked and I was outside, and I didn’t know where I was or how I got there, but then I saw Tommy far far away--*”

“--so he whined about it until I took him here.” Tommy rolled his eyes. “You’re welcome, by the way.”

Dreaxter beamed and patted Tommy on the head in an almost condescending manner. “*Thanks, Tommy!*” Tommy scowled and batted his hand away.

“Thanks, Tommy,” George echoed, much more genuine. He turned to the ghost. “Are you okay?”

“*Yeah!*” Dream thrust his hands forward, revealing that they were covered with glitter. It trickled between his fingers like sand in an hourglass, leaving sparkling trails on the floor. “*I even got more glitter!*”

“Dream?”

“*Dreaxter,*” the ghost corrected, turning to Bad. The demon took a step back-- rather comical, seeing as he loomed a good three feet over Dream. “*Hi Bad! How are you?*”

“You’re dead,” the demon said.

“*I am,*” Dream agreed. He held out another fistful of glitter. “*Want some glitter?*”

“You’re--” the trident slipped from Bad’s fingers, clattering to the floor. “You’re a ghost!”

“*Yeeees? I thought you already knew that.*”

“Sam didn’t tell us,” Antfrost murmured. His tail lashed back and forth with sharp, agitated movements. “Why didn’t he tell us?”

“He didn’t tell *anyone*,” Sapnap snapped.

Bad seemed to fold into himself. “Dream, I-- how did. . . how did you die?”

Dream shrugged. “*Don’t remember.*”

“Which is why we’re trying to get in there,” George said. He crossed his arms. “So are you going to let us in?”

Antfrost and Bad exchanged glances, their inner conflict clear. Sapnap took a step forward, opening his mouth to say something when--

“Oi, what the hell is going on here?”

Heads turned towards the entrance of the prison - all except one. Tommy, standing forgotten in the corner, instead looked towards Dream, who was staring at the man standing silhouetted in the gateway.

Quackity scowled back at them, his gold tooth gleaming. “Well? Why the fuck are you all standing around?”

139. *the adventures of dreaxter, pt. 8*

Dream was calm. Very calm. He’d already talked to Quackity as a ghost. There was no reason to get worked up over this, so if he could stop flickering like a glitchy TV screen, that would be great.

Unfortunately, there was a big difference between talking to Quackity in broad daylight while he covered every inch of Las Nevadas in edible glitter, and talking to Quackity in a dark entrance hall, surrounded by blackstone on three sides and Quackity standing in the exit. The orange sunset wasn’t helping.

Tommy sidled a step closer, positioning himself between Dream and Quackity. Probably for both of their benefits. If Dream lost control, Tommy would have to stop him.

He forced himself to remain still as Quackity’s gaze slid to him. The man’s eyes sharpened. “Oh. Dreaxter.”

“*Qua--*” Dream cleared his throat, his voice crackling like static. He could feel his hoodie fizzling, dangerously close to another transformation. “*Quackity. H-hi.*”

Quackity stared at him for a long, tense moment, then brushed past him. “Ant, Bad, George,” he greeted. “. . . Sapnap.”

“Quackity,” Sapnap returned. “Why are you here?”

Quackity shrugged, stalking up to the unlit portal. “I could ask the same for you. Sam!”

There was no reply.

“He won’t let any of us in,” Sapnap said. Quackity huffed and rolled his eyes.

“Of course he won’t,” he grumbled. “OI! Sam, I know you can hear me! I’m here to grab my stuff, and then I’ll be out of your hair!”

Ant straightened, a wary glint in his eye. “Your ‘stuff’?”

“None of your business,” Quackity snapped.

Dream swayed, dimly aware of the spiderweb cracks worming their way through his mask. Quackity’s tools. That’s what he’d left in the prison. It had to be. Why did he want them back?

“Dream,” Tommy whispered. “Dream, you have to calm down.”

“*C-can’t*,” the ghost hissed. His form glitched, slipping into a prison jumpsuit. Bad whipped around with a startled shout, eyes widening when he caught sight of Dream. Dream clamped down on his emotions, shoving them into a corner. The hoodie reappeared.

“What do you want to do?” Tommy murmured under his breath. By now, the others were turning to them, attention drawn by Bad’s shout. “This is a chance.”

“I . . .”

“Bad?” Antfrost glanced at his fellow guard, eyes narrowed. “What’s wrong?”

Bad swallowed. “I . . . I thought I saw--” he gestured at Dream, his clawed fingers trembling. “Th-that.”

“Saw wha--” George went still. “Oh.”

Dream looked down and realized that his fingers were stained with green. He tried to breathe through it, but the flickering only got worse.

Well, shit.

“I don’t have *time* for this,” Quackity growled, but his frustration was laced with alarm. “SAM! I swear to fucking Prime, open this portal!”

Dream took an unneeded breath, watching with detached curiosity as viridian bloomed across his sleeve. Tommy was talking, but the sound of his voice was drowned out behind the roaring in Dream’s ears. He couldn’t stay here. He had to get out. He had to escape.

Without another word, he turned tail and fled.

Well. On a scale of “everything is a-ok” to “FUBAR”, Tommy would rate this a solid “Shit Has Hit The Fan”. Their usual fatalistic humor wasn’t gonna cover this one. Dream was going to need therapy after this. *Again*.

“That’s it,” Sappnap snarled, storming over to a stunned Bad and grabbing him by the front of his collar. “Give me your keycard. Now.”

Bad blinked down at him, then looked in the direction where Dream had disappeared. He produced his keycard and handed it to Sappnap. “Bad--” Antfrost started, but Bad just shook his head.

“Dream. . . Dream is dead now. There’s no point trying to protect the prison.” Bad took a step back as Sappnap released him. “And. . . I want to know what happened. You-- you heard him screaming, Ant. I know you did.”

“Screaming?” George echoed. Bad winced.

“Screaming,” he confirmed. “I passed by his cell sometimes, and. . .”

Sappnap, eyes alight with cold fury, stalked past Quackity and shoved Bad’s keycard into the slot. The portal rumbled to life.

“Wait--” Quackity started, but Sappnap wasn’t listening. He plunged into the portal, George hot on his heels. Quackity cursed and hurried after them, face twisting into an agitated scowl.

Tommy was left standing in the entrance hall with the two guards. They glanced at each other, then looked at him. “Are you. . .?” Antfrost asked, gesturing towards the portal.

On one hand, following the others would prove entertaining - and he’d be able to report back to Dream about everything that happened. On the other hand, Dream definitely shouldn’t be alone right now. They’d figured out a while ago that being a ghost wasn’t exactly the best for their mental stability, and with how long Dream had been dead this loop, plus the number of emotionally-charged confrontations he’d had. . .

Tommy made his decision. “Nah, I don’t really care how he died. I’ll just go. . . check on Dreaxter, yeah? Good luck with. . . whatever shit you’re doing.”

Antfrost opened his mouth to answer, but Tommy was already hurrying away, following the fading trail of green ectoplasm spotting the ground.

Hopefully, he’d find Dream before he did something drastic.

Sapnap stepped out of the portal to find the lobby of the prison was devoid of life. He made a beeline for the next card slot, only to stop short when he realized how many there were.

“Bad,” he snapped. “Which one gets to the main cell fastest?”

“Uh-- this one,” Bad said. He took the keycard and slid it into a slot, then flipped the lever. Part of the wall slid away to reveal a passageway.

The two guards took the lead, escorting them up a staircase that ended in another locked door. If he were any less focused, Sapnap would have stopped to admire the sheer grandeur of the prison, built by one man. As it was, he was currently too angry at everything this prison represented to feel any appreciation.

The next series of hallways opened into a row of lockers. Sapnap swept his gaze across the room, but as with all the previous areas, the Warden was absent. He shrugged off his disappointment and hurried after Bad and Ant. At last, their group came to a fork in the paths. Bad gestured to the door on the left. “That one goes to the security room - Sam’s probably in there. The cell is the other way. Do you. . .?”

Sapnap glanced at George. George wordlessly pointed to the door on the right.

Together, they proceeded down the hall. The walk was fairly short, and within half a minute, they were in front of the main cell. The sea of lava had been drained away, but the cell itself was still too far and dimly lit for Sapnap to see the inside.

Antfrost slipped his keycard in and flipped the levers. “I’ll stay here,” he told them. The only response he got was Bad’s nod.

The platform rumbled to life, and the three of them stepped on. Sapnap noted in the back of his mind that Quackity had disappeared somewhere between the locker room and the main cell, but he pushed that thought aside. He had bigger fish to fry.

The platform ground to a stop. Sapnap kept his gaze on his feet as the three of them stepped off, unwilling to look just yet. He heard the netherite bars slide down as Antfrost recalled the platform.

“Oh,” George choked out. Bad inhaled sharply before he turned away, dry-heaving.

Sapnap grit his teeth, steeled himself, and raised his head.

Dream’s body had already begun to decompose - the humidity and the heat had not been kind to him. The floor of the cell was stained with coppery brown. When Sapnap breathed in, the scent of rotting flesh, underscored with ghast tears and iron, filled his lungs.

Bile rose in his throat. He swallowed it and closed his eyes, forcefully shoving his analytical mind to the forefront. He was here for a reason. He had to figure out what happened.

Sapnap took a deep breath, opened his eyes, and *looked*.

The corpse was propped up against the back wall of the cell, one hand thrown haphazardly over the gash in the front of its bloodied jumpsuit. The cloth itself was almost completely effused with reddish-brown, and when compounded with the bloodstains on the floor around it, the cause of death had likely been blood loss--

("I was cold, and tired. Really tired.")

--but that didn't explain the sickly-sweet smell. Someone must have used a regeneration potion in here at some point - likely Sam. Maybe Sam had discovered that the prisoner was dying and rushed in, trying to save him. Then when he failed, he locked himself up in the prison and refused to talk to anyone. It seemed like a reasonable explanation.

But then why weren't Dream's wounds healed? Why did Dream have those wounds in the first place? There were no weapons in this cell, nothing Dream could have harmed himself with - which meant that someone else had been here.

"Blades," George said beside him. Sapnap jerked, wheeling around to look at him. George didn't meet his gaze, instead staring intently at the corpse. "The wounds were made by a blade. Smaller than an axe or a sword, bigger than a scalpel. I'd say about the size of a kitchen knife."

". . . No intent to kill," Sapnap added. He shuffled closer to the corpse and squatted next to it. Something wailed in the back of his mind, but he ruthlessly shoved it down. He'd have time for a breakdown afterwards. "The wounds are too shallow. There's a chunk missing, too, right across the shoulder. It's uneven in the middle. . ."

George hummed, his voice monotone. "Two blades."

"Scissors?"

"Too small. Wool shears."

Sapnap pulled up a mental comparison and came to the conclusion that the weapon had indeed been shears. He glanced down. ". . . broken fingers."

"Deliberately broken," George added. "Missing teeth. Cuts along the arms, with the same knife." He nudged the corpse's ankle with the toe of his sneaker. "Slashed Achilles tendons, lacerated soles. Prevents running."

"Bad heard screaming."

"He heard it 'sometimes'. Multiple times."

"Ghast tears, Regeneration. . ."

"Damage to the jumpsuit with no matching wounds."

Sapnap looked up at George, something fiery and *hateful* seething in his chest. George looked back, his eyes colder than ice.

“Torture,” they concluded at the same time.

Sapnap rose to his feet. Without another word, he turned on his heel and stalked towards the platform. George fell into step a moment later. Bad made no move to calm them, instead glancing around the cell one last time before following.

The Warden had a *lot* to answer for.

189. *the adventures of dreaxter, pt. 9*

“*Sam!*” Sapnap roared, banging on the door. “Sam, I’m giving you *five seconds* to open this door!”

Five seconds of tense silence ticked by. The door didn’t budge. George turned to Bad and Ant, who were hovering anxiously behind them. “Do you have a key?”

Bad shook his head. “Only the Warden gets access to the surveillance r--”

Sapnap drew his pickaxe and tore into the iron door.

“... That works too, I guess?”

The blaze hybrid kicked aside the last few shards of iron, revealing the surveillance room. The space was illuminated in the eerie glow of several monitors, which were situated on a desk against the far wall. The Warden was slumped in a chair in front of the monitors, silhouetted in their light. He didn’t move as the four of them spilled in.

Sapnap crossed the room in three strides, spun the chair around, and hoisted the Warden - netherite armor and all - up by his collar. “*You*,” he snarled.

The Warden sagged in his grip. “Sapnap,” he said. He sounded. . . exhausted. This wasn’t the Warden persona he wore like armor - this was Sam, just Sam. And Sam was drowning in guilt.

Sapnap’s grip loosened by the slightest degree. Sam’s knees nearly buckled under him, but he only tottered in place for a moment before he found the strength to stay standing. The concave curve of his shoulders curled tighter, as though he was trying to hide from the numerous glowers aimed his way.

“Sam.” The inferno crackling in Sapnap’s voice had died down to a simmer, but the glowing of his eyes made it obvious that he was far from pacified by Sam’s guilt. “Care to explain what the *fuck* happened to Dream?”

Sam seemed to wilt impossibly *further*. “He. . . he died.”

“Yeah, *I noticed*. You’re the Warden. You were supposed to keep him trapped, not-- *torture him to death!*”

Sam's head jerked up. "Wh-- I didn't torture him!"

"You're the Warden. You, Bad, and Ant are the only ones with full access to the prison - and seeing how *surprised* they were when they ran into Dream's ghost, I don't think they did it. Which leaves *you*." Sapnap released Sam with a rough shove. The creeper hybrid flinched back as the netherborn jabbed a finger in his face. "You didn't let us into the prison. You locked yourself in your office. Whatever happened when you met Dreaxter upset him enough that he woke up halfway across the server with no idea how he got there. You really expect us to think you're *not guilty*?"

"I let his-- his killer into the prison, but I didn't hurt him!"

"Oh, so that makes it *better*?"

"It wasn't meant to go that far," Sam whispered. "He wasn't-- supposed to *die*. I tried to keep him alive, I patched him up after--"

A resounding *crack* echoed through the room. Sam staggered back, hand rising to the darkening splotch on his cheek. His gaze rose to his attacker, shoulders stiffening with surprise.

"Shut up," George said. His voice was cold and clinical. The darkened lenses of his goggles hid his eyes. Nothing in the calculated alignment of his posture suggested anger. And yet, everyone in the room could tell he was *furious*.

Most believed Sapnap to be the most dangerous when enraged, because Sapnap's wrath *burned* like the core of a dying star. But those close to the formerly-named Dream Team knew George was *worse*. George didn't burn. He *sliced* into his targets with merciless precision, then picked apart the remains with sharp-edged jabs. Everyone in the room had seen him reduce seasoned warriors to tears through words alone.

George himself knew how dangerous he could be - and so he restrained himself. Between him and Sapnap, he was the one who kept a level head and fell back on logic when emotions ran high. He was usually content to stay back and clean up loose ends.

This, however, was not a usual situation. And George was all out of patience.

"Tell me, Sam. Who did it?" The creeper hybrid went stiff like a rabbit in the claws of a wolf. George stepped forward, the *thud* of his shoes against the blackstone piercing the brittle silence. "You couldn't have done it. It's not your style. I've seen the way you kill. You don't enjoy it. If you wanted to make Dream suffer, you'd just withhold food. You're not one to injure someone to *that* extent." He nodded towards the central monitor, which was still displaying live footage of Dream's cell. "Of course, you might try to keep them alive through it, which is still torture - but it's not *killing*. The opposite, really. So, Sam. You said you didn't kill Dream. I believe you. But if you didn't do it, *who did*?"

Sam folded like a house of cards. "It was Quackity!" he shouted. "I didn't-- *Prime*, I'd never hurt him like that--"

Sapnap reared back, clearly surprised by the mention of his fiancé. His shock soon darkened into rage. “Qua-- *Quackity*? Do you think we’re stupid?! Quackity would *never* do something like that!”

“Check the security footage,” Sam snapped back. “George knows how to operate the system.”

Sapnap glanced back towards George, who ambled over to the monitors and inspected the large panel laid out across the desk. “. . . Is this based on Callahan’s--”

“Yes.”

George nodded, then set his hands on the control panel and began fiddling with the systems. Sapnap turned back to Sam. “Bad, Ant,” he called, his glare still fixed on the creeper hybrid. “Did Quackity ever visit?”

The two guards exchanged glances. “I don’t think so?” Antfrost said. “I’ve never seen him, and Sam stopped visitations after Tommy left.”

“He visited when the two of you were patrolling. I-- I took him through routes I knew you wouldn’t be following.”

Sapnap sneered. “Do you have a convenient answer for everything?”

“I’m telling the truth! Why would I lie about it being *Quackity*?!”

“Sapnap,” George called. His eyes were fixed on the central monitor. The redstone control board glowed beneath his fingers. “I found the footage.”

Sapnap strode over to him and peered over his shoulder. A moment later, he went bone-white.

Though the footage was grainy and indistinct, the build and body language of the figure looming over Dream was terribly familiar. “Q-Quackity?” Sapnap stammered. “No, that’s-- that can’t--”

His words broke off as the footage continued. There were no microphones in the cell, and so an oppressive silence descended upon the room as utter *carnage* played out across the screen.

When the shears came out, Sapnap snapped out of his frozen stupor. “Oh *Prime*,” he choked out, lurching away as his voice rose with a volatile mix of horror and disgust. “Fuck-- *fuck* -- I--”

He staggered to the corner, doubled over, and began gagging. George politely looked away and shut off the footage. The screen returned to an image of the cell - and the rotting corpse sitting inside of it.

“Fuck,” Sapnap sobbed. He slammed a fist against the wall. “*Fuck*.”

“I told you,” Sam said quietly.

Bad spoke up for the first time since he’d stepped into the room. His eyes were fixed on the screen. “You said we couldn’t see Dream because of what happened to Tommy. Was that a lie?”

“... Partly, yes. Dream was dangerous, but--”

“But you also didn’t want us to see Dream like-- like *that*.”

Sam’s shoulders sank with resignation. “Yes.”

Bad’s fingers twitched almost imperceptibly. “He couldn’t have hurt anyone,” he pointed out. His voice was eerily flat. “He could barely *move*.”

Sam’s shoulders sank further. “I know.”

Bad stared at him. Then he jerkily wheeled around and marched out of the room. Antfrost glanced between his retreating form and the others, his tail lashing wildly. George met his gaze.

“Go,” he said shortly. “We can handle it here.”

Antfrost didn’t need any more encouragement. He took off after Bad. George blocked the broken door over with obsidian, then moved to Sapnap’s side.

The blaze hybrid straightened on shaking legs, wiping his chin. “Why?” he rasped. “Why did he do it? Why did you *let him* do it?”

“The revival book. We-- Quackity wanted the revival book.”

“So you tortured him.”

“*I* didn’t torture him--”

“Oh, *excuse me*, you *let him* be tortured. My mistake.”

“Dream can’t be trusted with that power--”

“And *Quackity* can?”

“More than Dream!”

“So that makes letting him *bleed to death* okay?!”

“IT WAS AN ACCIDENT!” Sam shouted. “He wasn’t-- we never wanted him to die!”

A terrible silence blanketed the room. Sam must have sensed the shift in the air, because he tensed further. George was the first to speak. “So,” he said frostily. “You watched Quackity cut him up, beat him within an inch of his life, and drown him - but *killing* is where you draw the line.”

“Th-that’s not--”

Sapnap took a step towards him. “Tell me why we shouldn’t kill you right now.”

Sam swallowed. “Listen. I-- I know I fucked up. *Prime*, I know I fucked up. But-- you don’t have to do this.”

“Just like how you didn’t have to let Quackity into the prison, huh?” Sapnap drew his sword. Sam scrambled back, fumbling for his own weapons, but he was cornered and outnumbered. Before he could even draw his trident, the tip of Sapnap’s blade was wedged under his chin. He froze.

“Sapnap, wait.”

Sapnap’s head swiveled towards George. “*Wait?* ”

George met his glower with a flat stare. “He still has three lives. He’ll respawn somewhere else if we kill him. It’s better to keep him secure for now.”

Sapnap began trembling. For a moment, George thought he would actually lunge forward and sink his blade into Sam’s throat. Before he could intervene, however, Sapnap took a deep breath. “Take off your armor and give me all your weapons,” he ordered.

Sam swallowed. Carefully, he reached up and undid the clasps of his chestplate. Sapnap tracked his every move, sword at the ready as Sam began methodically removing every piece of netherite.

The Warden had just reached up to take off the last piece of armor - his helmet - when a muffled thud reverberated through the obsidian covering the doorway. George cleared the blocks aside to see Bad and Antfrost, both looking considerably more disheveled than before. The walls of the hallway beyond now sported several large dents and gouges.

“Welcome back,” George said with all the mildness of a man well-practiced in ignoring the volatility of a situation. “Can you stay behind to make sure Sam stays here? Sapnap and I need to go.”

Antfrost and Bad exchanged glances, then looked to the now-defenseless Warden. Sam stiffened under their gazes and hastily turned his stare to the floor as he handed his axe to Sapnap.

“Okay,” the demon said at last, stepping into the room. “Should we cuff him, or. . .?”

George shrugged. “Just make sure he doesn’t leave. Knock him out if you have to.”

Meanwhile, Sapnap had finished relieving Sam of his weapons and armor. He lowered his sword as *Warden’s Will* disappeared into his inventory. “You better not make me regret leaving you alive,” he snarled.

Sam nodded jerkily, sweat beading his brow. The blaze hybrid glowered at him for one moment more, then spun on his heel and stalked towards the door. George fell into step at his

side a moment later.

“Where are you going?” Antfrost called as they reached the threshold.

Sapnap glanced over his shoulder, eyes burning magma-bright. “To look for Quackity. He’s got a *lot* of shit to answer for.”

199. *the adventures of dreaxter, pt. 10*

“Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck,” Quackity chanted. He fumbled with the clasps of his chestplate, trying to ignore the mocking laughter ringing through his head. It sounded an awful lot like Ghlatt’s.

You’ve really fucked up this time, imaginary-Ghlatt cackled. They’re onto you. Better start running, flatty patty.

“You’re the one who started this shit,” Quackity hissed under his breath. He shoveled a few healing items into his inventory and slammed the chest shut. “Fuck, now I’m talking to myself.”

He spun on his heel and strode out of his bunker. The lights of Las Nevadas shone in the distance, but Quackity forced himself to turn away. Staying in civilized territory was too dangerous now. If Sapnap and the others hadn’t already found out about what he’d done, they’d know soon.

Quackity held no illusions about what he’d done. Torturing Dream had been a fucked up thing to do. *Killing* Dream, even unintentionally, was a fucked up thing to do. If the others caught up to him, there’d be hell to pay - so Quackity wasn’t sticking around to dish out.

The desert stretched on as far as the eye could see. Any ordinary traveler would have gotten turned around in all the sand and dust and dirt. But Quackity knew this land like the back of his hand - he’d mapped out every corner of it, figuring out the best routes in-- and out. After all, it wouldn’t do to build himself into a corner.

Heaving a heavy sigh, he trudged over another sand dune. The moon was shining down on him overhead, bathing the world in monochromatic silvers and blues. It was so easy to forget how beautiful this world could be, when it was untouched by war and greed.

Then *color* flashed in the corner of his eye.

Quackity’s head snapped to the right. A glowing figure drifted across the horizon, clad in desaturated green. Quackity could recognize that silhouette anywhere.

A wave of fury roared through him, crashing against the inside of his skull and leaving his ears ringing. Before he even realized what he was doing, he was striding towards the ghost. Sand sprayed beneath his heels as he drew near, alerting the other to his presence. The entity turned-- and went perfectly still.

“You,” Quackity hissed, distantly aware of the way Dream’s eyes went dark. “You *useless, good-for-nothing piece of shit*. None of this would’ve happened if you’d just *handed over the damn book*.”

The ghost just fucking *stared* at him, face frozen in infuriating blankness. Quackity reached out to shove him, but his hand swiped ineffectually through the Dream’s incorporeal body. This only made Quackity’s frustration burn hotter, and before he knew it, he was *screaming*. He couldn’t quite hear his own words over the roaring in his ears, but he knew it was something along the lines of “*this is all your fault*” and “*you should’ve just given me the fucking book*”. Through the red haze clouding his vision, he could see the way Dream folded in on himself like a dead spider. *Good*, the more vicious part of him thought. *Let him hurt. Let him suffer what I did.*

Stop, the corner of his mind that remembered crumpled feathers and shattered glass begged. *You’ve gone too far.*

But Quackity had already gone too far. Had been gone too far for him to ever go back. His life was falling apart for the hundredth time since he’d stepped foot on this accursed server, and he was *fucking sick and tired of it*. Time and again the monsters who’d hurt him got away, fleeing to Death’s domain and only returning to haunt him when they’d grown convinced of their own invincibility.

But Quackity wasn’t going to take this lying down. He’d spent *months* learning how to take Dream apart with words alone, and he was going to *use it*. So he shouted and shouted until he was hoarse, until his venomous accusations broke apart and he was left panting beneath the weight of his own fury. Through it all, Dream didn’t speak. Didn’t move. Just *looked* at him like he was looking *through* him. It pissed Quackity off, so he shouted some more. Only when a spell of lightheadedness had him rocking back on his heels and gritting his teeth did the haze clear from his vision. He inhaled sharply, trying to pull himself together.

Silence rang out for a full minute, broken only by Quackity’s heavy breathing. Finally, *finally*, the ghost moved to speak. Quackity watched hungrily Dream’s lips parted-- but instead of words, viscous *green* poured forth.

Quackity cursed and backpedaled as the tar-like substance spotted the sand. Dream hunched over, eyes wide and bewildered as he clapped a hand over his chin. His form fizzled and stuttered like a bad television signal, snatches of twisted limbs and sickening viridian swirling in and out of existence. Quackity, caught between horror and nauseated fascination, reached out to do. . . *something*, he didn’t know what-- and was stopped short by a sword at his throat.

“Hey. Step back.”

Slowly, Quackity’s eyes trailed from the blade at his neck to the person who held it. Tommy stared back, face perfectly neutral. The set of his jaw and the ice in his gaze, however, told Quackity all he needed to know.

“Wh-- are you *angry*?” An incredulous laugh crackled in Quackity’s chest, caught in his ribs, and tripped out as a distorted wheeze of disbelief. “You’re angry at *me*?”

“I dunno, watching you scream at a guy until he spit up blood was kinda annoying.”

“He killed you!” Quackity thrust a hand in Dream’s direction. “He-- he fucking *beat you to death* in prison, *abused* you-- and now you’re defending him? All because of some *memory loss*?”

Tommy’s glower grew more pronounced. “It’s not just because of the memory loss--”

“Oh no, I’m sorry, it’s because he’s *nice* too. Are you buying this bullshit? He dies and comes back with a bit less of his brain rattling around in his head and suddenly everyone just forgives him for the shit he did?”

Tommy barked out a laugh. Quackity reared back, struck by how utterly *humorless* it was. “Oh, no, Quackity. I didn’t *suddenly* forgive him. The others only tolerate him ‘cause Dreaxter *isn’t Dream*.” Tommy’s eyes narrowed. “Still doesn’t make what you did to either of them okay.”

“Tommy--”

“Back off, Quackity. And don’t think about running.”

Quackity raised an eyebrow, ignoring the way his heart pounded in his ears. “I’m in full netherite. You have a diamond sword. You think you can stop me?”

Tommy snorted. “I sent my coordinates to the World Chat when I found you, dumbass. You were too busy screaming at Dream to notice.”

“*Quackity*,” someone snarled behind him.

Quackity’s heart sunk into his boots. Slowly, he turned, and met the gaze of one *very pissed off* Sapnap.

The others were here. Quackity was out of time.

209. *the adventures of dreaxter, pt. 11*

Sapnap stormed up to Quackity, seething with fiery rage. “Quackity, you sonuvabitch--”

“Sapnap--”

Sapnap punched him. Quackity staggered back, hands flying up to his face as white stars sparked across his vision. Through the ringing in his ears, he heard shouting.

“Woah! Woahwoahwoah wait!” Tommy got between the two of them, all but shoving Sapnap back to impede his advance. “Sapnap stop! Calm down!”

“You *bastard*!” Sapnap was shouting. “I fucking *defended you*! I thought you could be trusted! You fucking *tortured Dream to death*?! What the fuck is *wrong* with you?! *HOW*

COULD YOU?!"

Defensive rage reared up in Quackity's chest. "Like you have any room to talk," he snapped back. The shiner forming over his bad eye was beginning to throb. "You and George and Karl *abandoned* me in El Rapids - you left and you didn't even *tell me!*"

Sapnap faltered, fury momentarily tempered by confusion. Tommy slid out of the confrontation, clearly realizing that this was not a moment to intercede. "You-- what? That's not--"

Quackity's blood pounded in his ears. "You *did*," he snarled. "What, was I not *good enough* for--"

"That's not what we're talking about right now."

George's voice cut through the red haze of rage, leaving Quackity with nothing but desperate fear. Sapnap's anger, however, only seemed to reignite. He stepped forward, tightening his grip on his sword, and Quackity scrambled back. That was *bloodlust* in Sapnap's eyes, and Tommy wasn't stepping in to save him this time--

His foot slipped on viridian-splattered sand. He tried to lash out, but Sapnap wove his blade past Quackity's guard and rammed the flat of it into his knuckles, forcing him to drop his weapon. Quackity fell back, squeezing his eyes shut as Sapnap lunged forward to end it--

"Sapnap."

Sapnap snapped to a halt, the tip of his sword mere centimeters from Quackity's throat. "George," he growled.

"Killing him won't solve anything," said George.

Sapnap didn't turn around. "Won't it?"

"It won't."

Sapnap's eyes glowed magma-bright, rage-fueled flames flaring in their depths. He closed them and took in a deep, shuddering breath. "... I want to kill him, George."

"I know."

"I'm so angry." Silvery smoke hissed between Sapnap's teeth. The air around him wavered like a mirage in desert heat. "I'm so *fucking* angry."

"I know. But killing Quackity won't solve anything." George stepped forward, past Sapnap, and knelt by Quackity's side. Quackity didn't resist as his hands were cuffed, all too aware of the trembling blade near his throat.

When the cuffs had been properly locked, George pressed his fingers under the flat of the blade and lifted it away. Sapnap stumbled back, lowering the weapon with a shaky breath.

With little fanfare, George hoisted Quackity up. As Quackity tottered to his feet and spun around, he got a good look at Dream.

The ghost had gone peculiarly still, and was now staring blankly into the middle distance. Before Quackity could process that, however, he heard a distant yell. He craned his head in its direction, going stiff when he saw the rapidly-approaching silhouettes of Bad and Antfrost.

“Where’s Sam?” Sapnap called as they drew near. His voice was rough, and he refused to look in Quackity’s direction. “Did you leave him at the prison?”

“We saw the coordinates in chat, so we moved Sam to the main cell and ran here in case you needed backup.” Antfrost’s gaze panned over the scene - Dreaxter staring vacantly across the desert expanse, the grim expressions on Tommy, George, and Sapnap’s faces, and the handcuffs around Quackity’s wrists. “. . . Looks like you have it all under control, though. What are you planning on doing with Quackity?”

Sapnap glanced back at Quackity, who glowered at him. Sapnap looked away. “Lock him in the Vault. With Sam.”

“No.”

Heads turned towards Dream. “Dreaxter?” Tommy asked.

“No,” The ghost repeated. His voice was chillingly flat. *“No Vault. That’s how this happened to me in the first place.”*

Quackity went ramrod-straight. “You remember?” he hissed,

Dream’s blank stare passed over him. Quackity shuddered as chills crawled down his spine. “*No Vault,*” the ghost murmured. *“Rehabilitation. Real rehabilitation. He needs help. Not hurt.”*

“Dreaxter,” Tommy said again.

Dream shook himself. Gray fizzled up and down his body, obscuring him in a cloud of monochrome static. When it cleared, he was once again in a hoodie, uninjured. Glitter, as viscous as blood, dripped from his fingers.

“Woah,” the ghost murmured. He blinked guilelessly at Tommy, then turned to look at the others. *“When did. . . all of you get here?”*

Tommy cleared his throat, drawing the ghost’s attention to him. “Hey, Dreaxter. Why don’t you, uh, come with me? I got something to show you.”

Dream beamed at him. *“Really? What is it?”*

“That’s a surprise.” Tommy made eye contact with George over Dream’s shoulder, glancing meaningfully at Quackity before turning away and motioning for the ghost to follow.

“C’mon, this way.”

“W-wait a minute,” Quackity protested, but Dream was already drifting after Tommy.
“Wait! *Dream*, you--”

“Shut up,” Sapnap hissed, slamming a palm over Quackity’s mouth. “You’ve already hurt him enough, just fucking *stop*.”

Quackity reared back. “You don’t understand,” he spat, shaking Sapnap’s hand away.
“He *remembers*. He’s faking his amnesia-- he’s planning something, you can’t--”

“Shut *up*,” Sapnap repeated, loud and angry. Quackity fell silent.

“Dream-- Dreaxter is right, though,” Bad said quietly. “If we just. . . lock them up and leave them to-- to *rot*, we’re no better than them.”

Sapnap bristled, but George spoke before he could protest. “We need to call a trial to decide what happens to them, but while we’re getting everything together. . . we can hold them in the Vault.”

There was a moment of silence as everyone waited for someone to object. Nobody did.

“I’d. . . be willing to act as a witness at the trial,” Antfrost said. He glanced at Bad, who tipped his head. “Bad too. I-I know there might be questions about-- about why we didn’t notice--”

“We’ll need to bring the footage too,” George said. Sapnap shuddered. “Some people won’t believe it without seeing it.”

Bad frowned. “But we can’t hold the trial in the prison-- there isn’t enough room--”

George waved a hand. “I’ll figure out how to move the recordings. In the meantime. . .”

Quackity stumbled forward as a hand settled between his shoulderblades, shoving him towards Sapnap.

“The prison transfer will be easier if he isn’t awake. Knock him out, Sapnap.”

Sapnap’s eyes flashed. The last thing Quackity saw was the pommel of a sword, headed straight for his face.

224. *the adventures of dreaxter, pt. 12*

CW: references to past torture and abuse, heavily flawed justice system

<TommyInnit> *ill keep him away from the mainland for now*

<TommyInnit> *plan the trial and whatever*

<GeorgeNotFound> *Does dream want a public trial? And does he plan to testify?*

<TommyInnit> *second one yes*

<TommyInnit> *he went all glitchy when i mentioned public trial but also said yes so that's a maybe*

<TommyInnit> *tell me what date you choose so i know when I can drag him back*

George sent a terse acknowledgment and turned off his communicator. He looked up at the other three in the room. "Dream—Dreaxter wants to testify in the trial."

"So that's three witnesses," Antfrost concluded. "Me, Bad, Dream. Are...either of you going to testify?"

George and Sapnap exchanged looks. "...I'll make a list of the, the—injuries," Sapnap said hoarsely. "George—"

"I'll present it with the camera footage," George agreed to the unsaid request. Sapnap's shoulders sagged with relief.

"Okay," Bad said, conspicuously not looking at the two of them. "And...are we making this public?"

"We should," Antfrost said. "We were all, uh, affiliated with Dream at some point. If we don't want people trying to help Quackity or Sam, we need to hold a public trial so they can see the evidence for themselves. If it's a closed-doors trial, people might think it's a ploy for us to get revenge on Sam and Quackity for killing Dream."

"But they didn't just kill Dream," Sapnap butted in, eyes flaring. "They *tortured*—"

"Yes, but no one's going to believe it or understand how—how *bad* it was until they see the evidence themselves. And you remember how—" Antfrost cut himself off, winced, and visibly took a moment to rephrase his words. "Dream's not...well-liked on the server. If people don't understand how bad it was, they might say that he—well. That he deserved it."

"The ghost already agreed to a public trial," George cut in. He left out the fact that Dreaxter had momentarily reverted to his more disturbing form when asked. The trial *had* to be public if they wanted to ensure that Sam and Quackity *properly* paid for what they did. If Dreaxter's comfort had to be sacrificed for a moment that he likely wouldn't remember later, then so be it.

"So we're all in agreement about making the trial public?" Bad asked. Antfrost and George inclined their heads in agreement. Sapnap followed suit, albeit more reluctantly. Bad took in their reactions, then took a deep breath and straightened. "Okay. Fair and public trial it is."

George cleared his throat. "Fair trial?"

"Fair trial," Bad confirmed.

George nodded. "Alright. Sapnap, get out."

Sapnap stared at him. George raised his chin and stared right back.

“You’re too emotionally invested,” he said. “If we want this to be a ‘fair’ trial, we can’t have you here.”

“We *want* Sam and Quackity to *pay*,” Sapnap snapped.

“And they won’t if we don’t do this properly. You really think nobody’s going to be scrutinizing our nonexistent justice system after this? If we screw this up, people might use what happened to *Dream* in prison as an argument to let Sam and Quackity go.”

Sapnap reeled back, the flames licking at the edges of his hair extinguished alongside the frustration blazing in his eyes. Woodenly, he pivoted around and stalked out of the room.

“That was...harsh,” Antfrost said quietly.

George’s expression remained blank, but it was now cast with an edge of exhaustion. “He’s like the ghost. Too emotionally involved. He can’t be part of the planning process, especially if he’s going to—attend the trial. He would’ve been too concerned with making Dreaxter feel comfortable.”

“...But we *should* make sure he feels safe,” Bad pointed out.

“Why? He won’t remember it if he doesn’t.”

Antfrost and Bad exchanged *looks*.

“He’s not Dream,” George said flatly. “He said so himself. It’s not his murder trial. He’s just a witness.”

“George—”

“Are we going to get on with planning or not?”

Bad once again exchanged *looks* with Antfrost, but wisely dropped the subject. “If we’re going for a fair trial,” he said, “we need impartial judges.”

“People who aren’t really close to anyone involved,” Antfrost muttered. “Eret, maybe. Foolish? No, he’s friends with Sam. Purpled. Puffy? Niki? Connor?”

Bad was already shaking his head. “I don’t think Connor or Niki are too connected with any of the people involved, but Puffy is...she was close to Dream.”

“And Hannah and Ponk are close to Sam.” George huffed. “Do we really need more than four people on the jury?”

“I mean, we’re not even including lawyers,” Bad pointed out. “There aren’t any set rules here. Four is probably enough.”

And so it was decided. They'd put Quackity and Sam on trial. Eret, Purpled, Niki, and Connor would be asked to act as a jury of sorts. They'd call up people to present evidence of their crimes, then give Quackity and Sam a chance to defend themselves. And then they'd let the jury decide what would happen to them.

"I'll announce the trial date," George said flatly. "Antfrost, Bad—check with the jurors and see if they'll be okay with acting as the jury."

"...Shouldn't we wait until after they've responded for you to announce the trial?"

"If they say no, the audience can decide." George's smile was sharp and devoid of humor. "The court of public opinion won't be on their side after this."

World Chat

<GeorgeNotFound> I have an announcement.

<GeorgeNotFound> This Friday at 13:00, Sam and Quackity will be put on trial for criminal violation of human rights concerning Dream.

<GeorgeNotFound> Anyone who wishes to attend, go to the courthouse where TommyInnit was tried before his exile. The sentence will be decided by an impartial jury.

<GeorgeNotFound> We ask that you withhold any attempts to interfere with the trial before you see all of the evidence.

The trial was not a fun time for anyone.

Quackity and Sam had been placed in temporary “cells” to make sure they wouldn’t try to escape or hurt someone else during the hearing. Quackity had spat and raged and paced behind the bars, but Sam had just—sat there, slumped, like a discarded doll.

All four jury members looked supremely uncomfortable to be there. Niki kept shifting in her seat. Eret’s brows were furrowed behind his sunglasses. Connor was attempting to become one with his chair. Purpled was trying to look bored, but his tense jaw and crossed arms belied his unease. The audience, for their part, were armed to the teeth and taut as a bowstring. Most sat at the edges of their seats, ready to leap up at the slightest provocation.

"Order," Eret called, taking over as the de facto lead juror. A hush fell over the crowd. The monarch cleared his throat. "As you all know, Quackity and Sam are being accused of..."

human rights' violations."

"Which is *bullshit*," Quackity called. "You *all* agreed to locking Dream up—"

"Wrongfully imprisoning Dream is *not* what you're being accused of," Eret said. "Neither are you being tried for allegedly killing Dream. We all know what the stance on killing in this server is."

Which was to say, killing was usually dealt with via vigilante justice.

"Antfrost—if you could please outline your accusations for the court..."

Antfrost stepped up. "We're accusing Quackity of committing torture for a sustained period of time and inhumane treatment of another player. We're also accusing Sam of inhumane treatment...and of being an accomplice to Quackity."

Eret nodded. "And you have evidence?"

"Witness testimony from two prison guards—myself and Bad—as well as Dreaxter, Dream's ghost. We also have...video footage. From inside the cell. And an autopsy report."

"Alright. You may present your evidence."

Bad stood. "If I could, I'd like to give a joint testimony with Antfrost?"

"Go ahead."

Once the presentation of evidence began, the tension in the room slid into outright horror. Dream *tried* to keep his "creepy ghost shenanigans" to a minimum, but he still found green dripping from his fingers as the jurors questioned Bad and Antfrost about the screams they'd heard and their encounters with Quackity in the prison. Sapnap's monotone recitation of the injuries found on Dream's corpse and the suspected cause of death had him phasing halfway through the bench. When George presented the damning cell camera footage, Dream simply gave up. He knew his limits. So he pasted a vacant expression on his face, turned, and drifted through the wall. The last thing he heard was a surprised "Dream—?" and Tommy saying "I'll go after him," and then he was standing out in the sunlight.

"Hey," Tommy said as he rounded the corner two minutes later, coming to a stop a few feet away from Dream. "You good?"

Dream shook his head. "I couldn't—I didn't know they had the—footage. I—I don't want to see it. I *can't* see it."

"Okay," Tommy said, easily accepting the jumbled near-nonsense that had just come out of Dream's mouth. He pulled out his communicator. "I'll tell 'em I don't think it's a good idea to bring you in while the footage is playing."

A wave of relief swept through Dream. "Thank you."

They sat in companionable silence for the better part of fifteen minutes before Tommy's communicator buzzed. He gave it a look-over before turning to Dream. "Ready to head back in?"

"Mm," Dream agreed reluctantly, rising from where he'd been staring at a nice patch of flowers. He glanced down to make sure his hands were stained with glitter instead of green before he moved towards the entrance. Tommy fell into step at his left shoulder in silent support.

They returned to a courtroom quite different from the one they had left. Something had *shifted* in the air—the anger and disbelief previously directed towards the prosecutors was now overshadowed with mute horror. Dream tried not to shudder under the many gazes pinned on him as he drifted back towards his seat.

Eret cleared his throat. "Dream—sorry, Dreaxter, you can go to the witness stand. It's your turn."

Well. Shit. Just when he'd calmed down, too.

With one last glance at Tommy for moral support, he made for the witness stand. Fuck. He didn't want to do this. Surely the existing evidence was enough? He'd thought he'd want to confront them, but—

"Do you remember how you died, Dreaxter?" Eret asked neutrally. His eyes were kind behind his sunglasses. Dream felt his shoulders relax.

"Um," he began, "*I don't remember a lot? I just, er, know I'm dead because.*" He gestured down at himself.

Purpled sat forward in his seat. "You don't remember 'a lot'. So you do remember *something*."

"*It was cold,*" was all Dream said.

"Makes sense with the blood loss," the mercenary grunted. Then he sighed and gestured at Dream. "Why are we even putting him on the witness stand? The other stuff's enough proof, isn't it?"

"Hey, they should at least get a chance to defend themselves." Connor shrugged one shoulder. "Right to face your accusers and all that. Quackity, Sam, do you—er—have anything to say?"

Sam didn't raise his head. Quackity, however, stalked forward and planted himself at the bars of his cell. "Look," he said, and though his voice was suave and his expression sly, the tense set of his shoulders revealed his anger. "I'm not a good person. I'd be the first to admit it. Yeah, what I did was pretty fucked up. But can you all really say Dream didn't deserve it?"

Half the courtroom recoiled, a knee-jerk reaction to such a blasé statement about the brutality they'd just witnessed. Quackity wrapped his hands around the bars and leaned forward, his diplomatic persona melting away as he zeroed in on Tubbo.

"You remember what he did. He screwed you over, Tubbo, you remember that? Manipulated you into exiling Tommy. He destroyed L'Manberg. He *laughed* when he did it." He turned to address the wider audience. "He stole your stuff, planned on using it to blackmail all of you so he could have you under control. He probably committed ten times the number of 'human rights violations' you're charging me with. You all were willing to *kill him* just a few months ago—and you *agreed* to his imprisonment. Sam and I?" Quackity spread his hands, half-lowering his eyelids and drawing his shoulders up in a shrug. "We were just doing our jobs."

Dream heard Tommy hiss through his teeth. The low hum of static crackled in his ears, accompanied by the low burn of sheer, unadulterated *rage*.

"You—" Sapnap snarled, stepping forward—only for George's hand to snap shut around his bicep and drag him back.

"The problem isn't that you killed him," the colorblind man said tersely. "The problem is that you *tortured* him."

"Why's everyone so torn up?" Quackity scoffed. "Yeah, he might've been our friend once. But the Dream we knew? He's been gone for a long time. The guy in the prison cell was a power-hungry monster. Look at the shit he pulled—I was doing all of you a favor."

And Dream—

—*snapped* .

He was distantly aware of the others in the courtroom lurching away from him, of the bruises blooming across his skin and the viscous green dripping from his fingers and the cracks splintering down his mask. He stalked towards Quackity, drawing his lips back in grim satisfaction as his torturer scrambled back, eyes wide. Fingers passed through his arm as someone—Tommy, probably—tried to yank him back.

"Oh yes, I did some fucked up stuff," he hissed. "My 'human rights violations' might've been just as bad as yours. But that doesn't fucking cancel out, Quackity. Did I deserve what you did?" Quackity opened his mouth to speak, but Dream bulldozed over him. "Don't pretend you did it out of justice or some shit—I was thrown into the prison and left to rot. That was justice. That was what the people agreed on. You decided to come in and torture me and tell me everyone endorsed it when they actually had no fucking clue what was going on in that prison."

"You killed Tommy—"

"So why not kill me in return?"

"The book! The revival book! You wouldn't give it to me—"

"Ah yes, the book. You wanted knowledge. Power. Control. And torturing me gave you that, didn't it? You enjoyed it. Just like how I enjoyed making my pawns run in circles."

Quackity bared his teeth. "I didn't *enjoy it*. It was necessary because you wouldn't give me the *damn book*."

"Stop lying to yourself. You enjoyed it. You liked having someone else at your mercy. Just like me."

"I didn't—"

"You smiled, Quackity. I remember it." Dream's lips stretched into an eerie smile. His voice changed, too, lightening into a tone that could *almost* be called cajoling—if it wasn't so terrifyingly *delighted*. *"C'mon, Dream. Just tell me about the book, and I won't have to hurt you anymore. No? Damn, looks like I'll have to pull another tooth. Hey, hold still—I might grab a bit of your tongue by accident."*

Quackity made a choked noise. "Th-that wasn't—"

Still smiling, Dream continued, *"Feel like talking now, Dream? No? Your mouth doesn't hurt that bad, come on. It's just a little blood, you can talk fine. Still a no? That's another tooth."*

"Fucking *End*," someone breathed from the audience box. Quackity was silent.

Dream's smile *twisted*. The manic light in his eyes settled into something sharper, *darker*. *"Everyone else hates you, Tommy,"* he crooned. *"But I don't. I'm your friend. I know what's best for you—so shut up and put your stuff in the hole."*

Tommy went rigid even as several eyes snapped to him. He'd known this was coming—had told Dream he was okay with it—but hearing it implied in front of over half the server made a part of him want to shrivel with shame.

"Just listen to me, Tommy. You never listen. If you did, I wouldn't have to do this." The smile dissolved from Dream's face, replaced with flat emptiness. *"Does that sound familiar to you, Quackity? Similar?"*

"Shut up," Quackity said.

"No. You created me. You have to deal with me." Dream took an unnecessary breath. *"Listen, Quackity—I don't care about what you did to me."* He paused. *"Okay, maybe I do care. A little. But I just can't fucking stand that you think you were doing everyone else a favor."*

"I was—"

"You told me Sapnap and George approved of what you were doing—did you really believe that? No, you didn't. Because you didn't tell them. You kept it a secret."

"That was—it wasn't—" This time, Quackity was the one who cut himself off. For the first time since the trial had begun, he seemed... *scared*.

Dream bared his viridian-stained teeth. *"You weren't avenging anyone, Quackity. You were enjoying a power trip—just like every other manipulative bastard on this Prime-forsaken server. Just like me."*

Quackity didn't seem to know how to reply, but Dream didn't wait for one—he rounded on Sam. “*And you, I TRUSTED YOU!*” he howled at the creeper hybrid, who reared back, eyes wide with alarm. “*Even if you didn't consider us friends anymore, I thought you'd at least remember basic human decency! We both knew the prison was unfinished when you threw me in, I—I didn't even have a bed to sleep on, all I had to eat were raw potatoes and then you—you let Quackity—do this to me!*”

He wasn't quite sure what he looked like anymore—but it definitely wasn't pretty. Dream could feel himself coming undone at the edges, his rage warping him into some grotesque, bleeding wreck of a creature. This was the problem with staying a ghost—even with their memories intact, their nature tended to overrule any emotional control they had in life. The veil of death left them viewing the world through a distant film of apathy—but when that film broke, it broke *hard*. And with ghosts' outward appearances being so reliant on their self-image...their fury could quite literally turn them into monsters.

A familiar voice reached through the burning fog. "Oi, Dream. Dreaxter."

Tommy?

"Yeah, it's me. You need to chill the fuck out. You're scaring the shit out of everyone."

What?

"You're doing the ghost shit again. Calm down."

I can't. They hurt me.

A sigh. "Come back, big D. Let go of it. Everything's gonna be alright, I promise."

The beloved nickname coaxed Dream out of the haze. He grew more cognizant of his form—but it was just that, *cognizance*, and the inferno raging inside of him prevented him from regathering himself. Tommy must've recognized the shift in awareness, though, because he sighed, stepped forward—and upended a jar of homemade glitter upon Dream's head.

The sheer *incongruity* of the action jolted Dream straight out of his spiraling anger. He blinked at the sparkling particles now coating his eyelashes.

"*Huh?*" was all he managed to say.

"Glitter," Tommy said gravely.

"*Glitter,*" Dream echoed incredulously. But despite the disbelief in his voice, he could feel himself visibly coalescing back into his customary form, his tattered prisoner garb rapidly repairing itself as though reversed in time. The sheer shock of Tommy's actions had effectively doused the fire raging inside of him, leaving the aching relief of catharsis behind.

Tommy's sharp stare roved over him. "You calm now?"

"*I...*" Dream flexed his hands. There was glitter under his formerly-missing fingernails. "...*Yes. I'm. Calm.*"

Tommy acknowledged his words with a nod and stepped back, leaving Dream once again alone at the center of the courtroom. The ghost took a moment to ground himself, closing up wounds and fixing up cracks until he looked just like he had when he was still an unharmed prisoner in Pandora's Vault. He didn't try to wrangle his orange jumpsuit into a green hoodie. He wanted to see the conclusion as *Dream*, not his amnesiac ghost.

When he was ready to face the music, he opened his eyes.

Sam stared back at him through the bars of his cell, eyes wide and face pale. Quackity, for his part, had retreated all the way to the back of his cell and was watching Dream with the wildness of a hunted thing. The dead man studied his two murderers for one stretching moment—then turned to the jury.

"I'm sorry for losing control like that," he rasped. His gaze slid to the audience, most of whom were half-out of their seats with weapons in their hands. *"That was. Unprofessional."*

Eret was the first to speak. "Are you...Dream?"

Dream's smile was more of a grimace. *"I guess. When a ghost gets too emotional, the unpleasant parts of us get dragged back."*

"That other ghost—Wilbur," Connor said. "He's never done anything like this—I don't think he has, right?"

It wasn't quite an accusation, but Dream felt the gazes on him intensify, looking for cracks in his facade. An unspoken question hung over the courtroom—was he lying? Was Dreaxter indeed Dream pretending to be an amnesiac just to avoid consequences?

Dream rearranged his expression into a sneer, sending up a mental apology to Ghostbur. *"Wilbur's ghost runs away from any situation that can make him emotional. My ghost apparently wants to face them head-on, so—"* he spread his hands mockingly, *"—here I am. At your service."*

The jury exchanged *looks*, unsure of how to proceed. Eret was the one to finally speak. "Are there...any other statements or testimonies you would like to provide?"

"No. I've said everything I wanted to say. Except—" Dream glanced over at the two defendants, then back to the jury. *"When you sentence them...don't give them a sentence like mine. It's not rehabilitation, it's a slower execution."*

Eret nodded sharply. "Thank you, Dream. If that's all, you may return to your seat."

Dream drifted over to Tommy, feeling like a rowboat in stormy waters. The ever-present weight of resentment in his chest was—not gone, but lightened, and he felt unmoored without it. It was a...good feeling. Cathartic. But so, so terrifying at the same time—because that rage had kept him grounded, and without it, he felt as though he'd lost a fundamental part of himself.

He'd thought he'd learned to let go during the loops. Turns out, he'd just been using humor to hide how much pain and anger he'd held onto.

"Better?" Tommy asked him quietly. Dream nodded. He could feel George and Sapnap's stares burning holes into the side of his head, but he didn't look over. He wasn't ready for that conversation yet.

The rest of the trial passed by in a haze. Dream caught bits and pieces—the jury declaring the defendants clearly guilty on the basis of evidence, then moving on to decide the sentence; Eret asking for opinions from the audience, roping them into the discussion; The silence from Sam and Quackity's corner of the courtroom; Tommy subtly fending off any curious glances or questions directed towards Dream. And Dream barely noticed any of it—he was too preoccupied with putting himself back in order.

A gentle nudge to his shoulder drew him out of his daze. A hush had fallen over the courtroom. "They're announcing the final decision," Tommy muttered in his ear. In the jury box, Eret rose to his feet.

"Quackity." The monarch took a deep breath. "The court finds you guilty of excessive, unnecessarily inhumane treatment of a prisoner. Sam, the court finds you guilty as an accomplice.

"Taking into consideration the request of your...victim, and at the suggestion of the court, you are sentenced to three years of house arrest—provided you remain on good behavior—and biweekly, *mandatory* therapy sessions, which Puffy has volunteered to provide."

An unnameable feeling bloomed in Dream's chest. It wasn't *relief*, not quite, but he felt—lighter. It was healing, in a way, to see a trial ending in an outcome that was supposed to help the defendants become *better*. And as much as he feared Quackity and Sam—*hated* them, even—he knew they'd once been good men. The circumstances they now lived in had twisted them into something unrecognizable, but maybe this could help.

Eret continued. "Are there any objections to this decision from the jury, prosecution, or the audience?"

Looking up, Dream scanned the courtroom—coming to a stop on Sapnap and George, who he'd honestly expected to fight for a harsher sentence. George's face was about as expressive as a stone wall. Sapnap...looked troubled, but his eyes weren't glowing any more than usual and he seemed more pensive than frustrated.

"Very well, then," Eret said. "Antfrost, Bad, George, and Sapnap will be in charge of enforcing the sentence. Please explain the system you plan to use and your expectations to Sam and Quackity *before* you implement it, and adhere to it. If you abuse your power or exercise unnecessary cruelty, you will face consequences. Do you understand?"

"We do," said Bad.

"Good. Now if there's nothing else...?" When nobody spoke up, Eret nodded. "Alright. Court adjourned."

All the tension in Dream's body melted away. He slumped back against the hard wooden bench, taking in an unneeded breath. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sapnap and George stand—but before they could approach, Tommy intercepted them. Dream couldn't hear what the ensuing sharp, hissed conversation was about, but it ended with George and Sapnap backing off and turning their attention towards Quackity and Sam's cells. Tommy sat back down beside Dream and said nothing.

Frankly, Dream was thankful for it. His mind was already a mess without the added stress of an emotional conversation.

This entire loop had been a whirlwind. To know that there was a very real possibility of Quackity going too far and killing him—it was frightening. But at the same time, this entire experience had been...liberating. It had given him a chance to free the long-suppressed resentment curdling within him. Before, he couldn't express that anger without consequences—whether they be physical when he was in the Vault, or mental, if he went too far and took it out on an innocent version of his jailers. But now, he'd been allowed to speak to his heart's content without fear of retaliation and with Tommy to hold him accountable.

It was over. Quackity and Sam would face justice for what they'd done. Yes, this wouldn't last—but Dream had finally been allowed to say what he'd *needed* to say. He no longer had to harbor the bottled-up fury that had burned within him for so long. Now, he could begin to heal.

Dream closed his eyes and finally, *finally*, let go.

toddler tales (complete)

Chapter Summary

TLDR: Takes place during Tommy's hiding-at-Technoblade's-house arc. Tommy accidentally turns both himself and Dream into toddlers.

39. *toddler tales, pt. 1*

“You,” Dream said flatly, “are not allowed near a brewing stand ever again.”

“Well, how was I supposed to know that it’d do this?!” Tommy protested, chubby cheeks puffing with irritation. He waved his arm, effectively slapping Dream in the face with his now oversized sleeve. Dream scowled and tried to waddle forwards, only to discover that walking in shoes ten sizes too big was Very Difficult.

“This is all your fault,” he huffed instead. “For the record, throwing half-finished splash potions at people--”

“You startled me!”

“--isn’t a good defense reflex. And learn better observational skills, Tommy.”

“Shut up, you--”

The door opened. Dream and Tommy turned to see Technoblade staring down at them.

“Oh shit,” Tommy said.

Dream did the only thing he could think of. “Woah, mister!” he chirped. “Your hair is pretty!”

Technoblade stepped back out and shut the door.

“Rude.”

“Okay,” Technoblade hissed to himself. “Okay. There are two small children in my house. The small children are mortal enemies who probably have no idea who anybody on this server is. This is fine. I definitely have experience takin’ care of small children-- shut up, Chat.”

He took a deep, fortifying breath. He could do this. He *could*. He was Technoblade, a man feared for his battle prowess and terrifying determination. Once he set his mind to anything, he would do it-- come hell or high water.

He opened the door again, and was promptly attacked by a toddler wielding a stick.

Technoblade's first instinct was to kick said toddler away. Unfortunately, he could imagine the consequences of such an action, and thus wasted precious time restraining himself from carrying it out. Consequently, the toddler got him in the knees. He crumpled to the floor, where the other toddler began beating him over the head with his tiny fists.

Okay. This was fine. The mighty Blood God felled by two children.

L, said Chat. Technoblade decided that Chat could shut up.

Reaching up, he grabbed Dream's wrists, trying to save his skull from more battering. Then he straightened and gently pushed Tommy away, reaching out and snatching the stick from his grasp. Tommy screeched like an offended pelican and went for his throat.

"No," Technoblade said.

"I DON'T LISTEN TO KIDNAPPERS!" Tommy screamed, having discovered that Technoblade's throat was too high to reach. He settled for punching Technoblade in the stomach instead.

BabyInnit used punch! Chat sang. It was super effective!

Technoblade could feel a headache building. "No," he repeated, this time to both the toddlers and his Chat.

"Leggo!" Dream screeched, kicking Technoblade in the shin. "Leggo, you dirty kidnapper!"

"I'm not a kidnapper," Technoblade protested, releasing his grip on Dream's wrists. The toddler immediately began to batter his leg. "I didn't kidnap you."

"Liar!" Tommy shouted. "Where's Wilby?! I want Wilby!"

"Look, Tommy, Dream--"

"HOW THE FUCK DO YOU KNOW MY NAME?!"

The headache was reaching migraine levels. "Listen, the two of you are in the future."

That shut them up. "The future?" Dream whispered, fist drawn back to punch Technoblade in the leg again.

"The future," Technoblade confirmed.

"You're lying," Tommy accused. "That sounds like something a kidnapper would say."

In *what universe* would a kidnapper come up with something as ridiculous as ‘you’re in the future’? Technoblade shelved that question for another time. “Look, there’s gotta be some way to prove it to you.”

Tommy stared at him for a long moment. Then: “Where’s Tubbo?”

“What?”

Tommy scowled. “If we’re in the future, then Tubbo’ll be all grown up,” he said. “I wanna see Tubbo.”

“I wanna see Sapnap!” Dream piped. “Is he here?”

Oh. Oh no.

“Uh,” Technoblade said, sweating nervously. “Tubbo and Sapnap are. . . very far away from here. It’ll take a while to get them.”

Both children crossed their arms. “I can wait,” they chorused in unison.

This was a very bad idea. “That’s. . . uh. . . Tommy, Dream. . . they. . . Tubbo and Sapnap aren’t, um, friends with you anymore.”

There was a moment of silence. And then: “What?”

Tommy’s lower lip began to tremble, eyes growing watery. Next to him, Dream scowled, looking ready to throw a tantrum. Technoblade hastily backpedaled. “Uh, I, I mean, of course you can meet them! I’m sure they’ll be really happy to see you because you’re definitely still friends-- please for the love of Prime *don’t cry*.”

Tommy’s tears receded into his head so quickly that Technoblade nearly got whiplash. “YES!” he whooped, hopping victoriously only to trip over the hem of his oversized shirt-- which was basically a dress on him. Technoblade caught him before he could faceplant.

“. . . Why don’t we get you some fittin’ clothes first?”

42. toddler tales, pt. 2

“*Phil!*” Technoblade hissed, pounding on the door. “*Phil, open up, it’s me!*”

“You’re gonna drop me,” one of the toddlers tucked under his arm complained.

“Why are you whispering?” the other asked curiously.

“*Shhhhh, we’re in enemy territory.*”

A scoff. “Then why the fuck are we sneaking around?” Tommy demanded, trying to wriggle out of Technoblade’s grasp. Technoblade was forced to grab him with his free arm, an act that

was somewhat difficult due to the fact that he couldn't see either of the children. He'd hit them all with a splash potion of invisibility before they'd entered L'Manberg borders; he wasn't about to pick a fight with two children in his temporary custody - even if the two children happened to be his current semi-mortal enemy/ally (who he still owed that favor) and a gremlin he'd caught hiding in his basement.

Despite what he had said, he actually had no plans to return Tommy and Dream to L'Manberg. Or even expose their condition, for that matter. Given L'Manberg's track record, he was pretty confident in the assumption that they would rather commit child murder than risk the two returning to their normal ages-- Dream especially.

But he was also aware that he absolutely *sucked* at caring for children. Which was why he was sneaking into L'Manberg to get Philza Minecraft, the man notorious for his chronic adoption problem. He was pretty sure Philza had actually *been* Tommy's adoptive father for some period of time, though Wilbur had been the one to find him. What he *wasn't* sure about, however, was if Tommy remembered Philza. Hopefully he did-- it would make Technoblade's life easier.

Tommy squirmed in his grasp. "LEGGO!" he screeched, and Technoblade silently prayed that nobody had heard him.

The door flew open. The retired Angel of Death scanned the area, a sword in his hand. The light on the monitor cuff clapped around his ankle glowed red.

"Oh thank Prime-- *Phil*, It's Techno. I'm invis right now."

Philza blinked but gave no other outward reaction that he had heard him. Casually, he stepped out onto his balcony, scanning the area like he had seen something strange-- leaving the doorway wide open. Technoblade took the opportunity to slip into the house.

As soon as he was in, Philza turned on his heel and reentered the house. He shut and dead-bolted the door behind him, then scanned the room. "Techno? Do you need some milk?"

"I got it," Technoblade grunted. "The potion will wear off soon anyways. I actually came here because I had a problem."

Philza turned towards the direction of his voice. "What kind of problem?"

"Mister Minecraft?" A high-pitched voice piped up.

Well. There was the answer to Technoblade's question. Tommy remembered Philza.

Philza, for his part, physically recoiled. His wings bristled and pulled tight against his body. When he spoke, his voice cracked. "*Tommy?*"

"And Dream!" Dream piped up. Philza paled. Technoblade stepped in before the situation could spiral.

"Potion mishap. Tommy and Dream got turned into kids," he explained. The invisibility potion was starting to wear off, and Philza could now see the faded forms of two children

under each of his arms. “I have absolutely no experience in carin’ for kids. Was hopin’ you’d be able to help.”

Philza stared at them, mouth opening and closing soundlessly. Tommy, on the other hand, was never at a loss for words.

“You said we were in tha’ future!” he wriggled, forcing Technoblade to set him down or risk dropping him. The man hastily grabbed the back of the toddler’s shirt before he could run. “Liar!”

“Liar!” Dream echoed, which was a whole new category of bizarre. Since *when* did Dream follow Tommy’s lead?

“You two are technically in the future from your perspective,” Technoblade deadpanned. “I wasn’t lyin’.”

Dream blinked. “What’s per- pre-- prospeckive?”

“Perspective. Uhhh, means, how you see the world, basically.”

“Oh. Whas’ ‘bay-sick-lee’?”

“Okay,” Philza interrupted, having managed to compose himself enough that his outward shock had downgraded into internal screaming. He waved towards a doorway, through which a bed and several chests were visible. “Uh, kids, why don’t-- why don’t you go play in the bedroom?”

Tommy crossed his arms. “Dun’ wanna.”

Philza tried for a smile. “Please?”

Tommy stared at him for a moment. Then: “Do you know the kidnapper?”

Philza’s smile became more strained. “Yeah. His name’s Technoblade. He’s a friend.”

“A friend,” Tommy repeated dubiously. Dream sidled up to him.

“Do you trust him?” he whispered not-so-quietly.

“He’s Wilby’s dad,” Tommy whispered not-so-quietly back. “I think I do.”

Dream glanced between Tommy and Philza. “Okay,” he said with the dignity and self-importance of a three-year-old child. “We’ll go to the room.”

Tommy jabbed a chubby finger at Technoblade, eyes narrowed. “Don’t trust you,” he declared, then slowly backed into the bedroom, keeping his gaze trained on the piglin hybrid. Dream hurried after him, glancing uncertainly back at the two adults.

“Close the door, Tommy!” Philza called.

“Okay, Mister Minecraft!” Tommy sent one last suspicious glare at Technoblade, pointing two fingers at his eyes before directing them at the piglin hybrid in a ‘I’m watching you’ gesture.

The door shut. Philza stared at it for a moment, then turned to Technoblade.

“What the fuck, mate.”

“Phil, please,” Technoblade begged. “You gotta help me-- I don’t know what to do.”

Philza took a deep breath, then crossed his arms. “Okay, why don’t you tell me what happened?”

“Long story short, Tommy’s been hiding in my house from Dream. I left for a while to hunt, but Dream must’ve come by while I was out. Came back to find two toddlers next to my brewin’ stand. I’m guessin’ that Tommy was brewin’ somethin’ when Dream found him, so he threw a half-finished potion at Dream and--” he gestured at the bedroom door. “They don’t have their adult memories either. Tommy seems to recognize you, though-- didn’t you adopt him?”

Philza looked troubled. “He didn’t start calling me ‘dad’ until he was five,” he said. “Wilbur found him by himself in a park. He kept insisting that his parents would come back for him, but. . .”

“But they never did.”

“Yeah. He saw Wilbur as an older brother, but he saw me as ‘Mister Minecraft’, Wilbur’s dad-- not his own.”

They both looked up at a crash, followed by muffled yelling through the bedroom door. “You boys okay?” Philza called.

Both children paused in their argument. “Dream’s cheating!” Tommy whined.

“Am not!” Dream protested hotly. The shouting resumed.

“They’re fine,” Philza huffed, a bittersweet but fond smile on his face. “. . . it’s been a while since I’ve seen Tommy like this. How old are they?”

“Somewhere between one and fifteen,” Technoblade deadpanned. “I was hopin’ you could narrow it down for me.”

Phil laughed. “I’d say they’re about two or three. I’m not sure why Dream’s the same age as Tommy, given how I’d expect the potion to work, but. . .”

“He probably got hit with more of it.”

Another crash. More muffled yelling, peppered with the occasional swear word. Technoblade sighed. “Phil, they wanna see their ‘friends’.”

Philza's wings shuffled uneasily. ". . . That probably wouldn't go well."

"Exactly," Technoblade groaned. "Please, Phil. You gotta help."

Philza snorted. "Mate I'd be happy to, but you can't leave 'em in L'Manberg. The closer they are to the President and his Cabinet, the more danger they'll be in. Speaking of, why didn't you just leave them at home?"

Technoblade stared at him. "They'd probably burn down the house or somethin'. I can't leave them unsupervised."

"But we've left them unsupervised for the past few minutes and it's been fine," Philza pointed out. "They've even stopped shouting."

A pause. Both adults stared at each other.

And then Philza rushed across the room and threw the door open, revealing an empty bedroom. The blankets and bedsheets had been fashioned into a rope, which hung from the wide-open window. Both toddlers were nowhere in sight.

"Shit."

57. toddler tales, pt. 3

"Why couldn't we have done this in my office?"

"Because," Quackity drawled, his hands folded behind his head. "Taxes are boring, and if we talked about them at your office I'd fall asleep."

"So you dragged me out here," Tubbo deadpanned. Quackity shrugged.

"It's a nice day. When was the last time you saw the sun?"

"This morning."

"Let me rephrase that. When was the last time you saw the sun without a window in the way?"

Tubbo's silence was telling. Quackity nodded sagely. "Exactly. I get that you're the president and you got shit to do, but you gotta take care of yourself too. Running yourself into the ground isn't gonna help anyone."

Tubbo sighed. "Quackity--"

There was a snap of a twig breaking. Quackity whipped his head in the direction of the sound, drawing his axe. Behind him, Tubbo pulled a sword from his inventory.

"Who's there?" The vice president of L'Manberg demanded.

A pause. The two watched warily as the underbrush shivered, the sound of two people whispering not-so-quietly reaching their ears. And then a child tumbled out of the bushes and onto the path, bringing up his tiny fists like he was about to throw a punch. A second child shuffled out after him, giving them a wide berth.

“Wha--” Quackity spluttered, lowering his axe. “*Kids?*”

“Are you gonna kidnap us too?” the first child demanded.

Tubbo stared at him. His shock of blonde hair, his blue eyes, his voice. . .

“Tommy?” he blurted. The child gaped at him.

“*Tubbo?*” he asked. “Oh my fucking Prime, you’re ma-- mash-- massi--”

“Big,” the child hiding behind Tommy piped in.

“--big,” Tommy finished, nodding his head. Then he paused. “Wait, so the kidnapper wasn’t lying?”

“Mister Minecraft said he trus- trusted him, right?” the mystery child pointed out. “So he’s not a liar.”

Tommy whipped back around. “Why are you big?” he demanded.

“Why are you *small*?” Tubbo asked. Tommy puffed up indignantly.

“I am not *small*,” he hissed, eyes narrowing to slits. “I am the big man. The biggest man.”

“Uh,” Quackity said intelligently. “Wait. That’s, uh, that’s *Tommy?*”

“Who the fuck are you?” The toddler snapped.

“I’m-- you don’t remember me?”

“I said, *who the fuck are you?*”

“Big Q,” Tubbo muttered to his vice president. “He might-- he might not remember anything. Because. Because he’s a kid now.”

“. . . I’m Quackity,” Quackity said, crouching down. His axe disappeared into his inventory. “And who are you?”

“I’m Tommy Careful Danger Kraken Innit,” one toddler declared. “The biggest man in the world.”

There was an awkward pause as they waited for the second toddler to introduce himself. When it dragged on for a moment too long, Tommy added, “And this is--”

The second toddler hastily clapped a hand over his mouth. “Ma told me not to tell my name to strangers,” he said quickly. Then he squealed and pulled his hand away, rubbing it

frantically on the sleeve of Tommy's shirt. "You licked me!"

Tommy stuck out his tongue. "This is Dream," he announced. "Tubbo's not a stranger. We can trust 'im!"

"But he's *big* now," Dream protested.

"Doesn't matter how big he is, he'll always be my friend!"

Quackity had gone still. "*Dream?*"

Dream paused. "Did. . ." he started slowly. "Did you know big-me?"

Quackity's face twitched into something close to a grim smile. "You could say that." His hand drifted downwards, the faint edges of an axe hilt coalescing between his fingers as he began to pull it from his inventory. Tubbo caught his wrist.

"Quackity," he said warily. "Don't."

Quackity's smile became noticeably more strained. "Wait here," he told the children. "I just. . . gotta talk to Tubbo for a second."

He led the president down the path, far enough that they were out of hearing range but still within view. "Tubbo," he started. "Tubbo, Dream--"

"We're not killing him."

Quackity blinked, taken aback. "I-- what?"

"We're not killing him," Tubbo repeated, squaring his shoulders and looking him in the eyes.

"But-- but he's vulnerable right now!" Quackity protested. "He's a literal kid, he can't defend himself--"

"Which is exactly why we're not killing him."

Quackity took a deep breath. "Tubbo, Tubbo, Tubbo. Dream is a bastard. Doesn't matter what age he is, he's still a war criminal. He needs to pay."

Tubbo stood his ground. "He doesn't remember what he did."

"And there's a chance he will later!" Quackity gestured in the direction of the toddlers. "You think he's gonna stay like this forever? We got a chance, Tubbo, and we have to fucking take it!"

"Dream's a *child*, Quackity!" Tubbo shouted back. "We're not executing a three-year-old for shit he doesn't even remember doing!"

"Whas' essacuting? "

Both men whirled around to see the two toddlers, now standing only a few feet away. Dream was half-hiding behind Tommy, eyes round and face pale. Tommy himself was glaring up at Quackity, arms crossed over his chest.

“... Didn’t I tell you to wait over there?” Quackity asked.

Tommy scoffed. “Like I’m gonna listen to you. What’s *essacuting*?”

“Executing,” Dream corrected quietly. “We did it back home. It means making someone sleep f-forever.”

Tommy frowned. “Like. . . Mister Minecraft does to the zombies? With his sword?”

Dream nodded. Tommy turned to the older two. “You’re. . . you’re gonna hurt Dream?”

“Tommy,” Quackity said, “Dream-- Big-Dream, he isn’t a good person. You gotta get that.”

“No,” Tommy snapped. He pointed a chubby finger at Quackity. “Dream is my friend. I don’t care what the fuck big-Dream did. Hurt ‘im and I’ll hurt you.”

“You don’t understand,” Quackity insisted. He drew his axe and stepped towards the two children. Tommy took a step back - right into Dream, who had frozen in place.

“I don’t wanna die,” the child whispered, green eyes wide with terror.

Quackity faltered. Tommy took that moment to grab Dream and *bolt*, short legs sprinting down the path. Tubbo half-turned in pursuit, only to stop, watching them go with a conflicted expression. By the time Quackity had recovered enough to start after them, they were already out of sight, hidden by the undergrowth surrounding the path.

“Quackity,” Tubbo called after his vice president. “Quackity, stop.”

Quackity skidded to a stop, glaring in the direction the children had disappeared in. “We have a *chance*, Tubbo,” he snapped. “L’Manberg can finally be free.”

“At the cost of a child’s life.”

“He’s not a child!”

Tubbo crossed his arms. “Quackity. As your president, I’m ordering you. Stop.”

“And as your vice president, I’m telling you that it’s for the greater good,” Quackity grumbled, but he lowered his axe and let it dematerialize into his inventory.

“Do you *want* to trauma-- traumatize Tommy?” Tubbo demanded. His voice cracked, and he cleared his throat. He could have a crisis about this later. “He’s a *toddler*, Quackity.”

“He’ll thank us when he turns back.”

“That’s the thing, Quackity. We don’t know if he will.”

“... There’s gotta be *some* way, Tubbo--”

“And we don’t know if Dream will turn back either,” Tubbo interrupted. “Yeah, he might, but what if he doesn’t? You’ll risk killing an innocent kid?”

“It’s for the greater good,” Quackity repeated. He sounded more like he was trying to convince himself. Tubbo shook his head.

“You could kill Dream,” he said quietly. His scars ached. “But then we’d be no better than Schlatt.”

Quackity remained silent.

“Think about it, big Q,” Tubbo murmured, then turned on his heel and walked away.

He wasn’t exactly on the best terms with Philza, but Dream had mentioned a ‘Mister Minecraft’. Hopefully, he had some idea of what had happened to Tommy - and more importantly, how to fix it.

63. *toddler tales, pt. 4 (inspired by Gamergamer)*

There was a small child stalking Puffy.

Not that the small child knew that she knew he was stalking her. She was careful not to react whenever the sound of a branch snapping or childish giggles reached her ears. Occasionally, she did sneak a glance, catching a flash of brown hair and viridian eyes before they disappeared back into the foliage.

She bit back a smile as another twig snapped. All sound instantly ceased, as if the child had frozen, before slowly resuming when Puffy merely continued to stroll unbothered down the path. A low, hissing conversation started behind her, and when she glanced back, she caught sight of a pair of blue eyes before they vanished with an ‘eep’.

Correction: there were *two* small children stalking Puffy.

Puffy dearly wanted to hunt down Dream and demand to know *why* he thought inviting two *toddlers* to a server like this was a good idea. Unfortunately, nobody had seen Dream in nearly a month. Puffy would have to settle for protecting the kids until he reappeared again.

She hummed thoughtfully. The children had been following her for nearly twenty minutes, and appeared to have no intention of revealing themselves. With that in mind, she sped up, slipped around a bend in the path, then stepped into the foliage. With experienced movements, she padded silently across the forest floor, heading towards the hushed, ongoing conversation.

The two children came into view. Puffy let out a quiet huff of air at the sight of them. Prime, they were *tiny*.

“Where’d she go?” the one wearing an oversized dress shirt and brown cloak hissed.

“How the fuck would I know?” the other one snapped. He, too, was sporting an oversized shirt, the rolled-up sleeves dragging on the ground. Puffy cleared her throat.

Both children whipped around, eyes widening to the size of dinner plates. “Hello,” Puffy said.

“Hi,” the smaller one squeaked. “Please don’t kill me.”

Puffy’s smile dropped. Oh, she would be having *words* with whoever hurt this kid. “I’m not going to hurt you,” she promised, crouching down. “What’re your names?”

Both children remained silent, staring mistrustfully at her. Puffy smiled slightly. Not giving their names to strangers-- smart.

“Here, I’ll go first. My name’s Puffy. Are your parents nearby?”

The child with green eyes - Puffy just decided to dub him Green until she figured out his name - shook his head. The other child - Blue - puffed up, his chubby face twisting into a scowl.

“Whas’ it to you?” he demanded. “You gonna kidnap us too?”

Okay, forget having words. Puffy would be *stabbing* whoever kidnapped these two. Were they stolen from another server? Their parents must be worried out of their minds.

“I just want to help you find your parents again,” she soothed. “How did you get onto this server?”

A pause. “. . . The kidnapper said we were in the future,” Blue said slowly.

Green peeked out from behind Blue. “He said we got turned into kids.”

Puffy blinked slowly. “Got. . . turned into kids?” Green nodded silently.

“My name is Tommy,” Blue blurted impulsively. He paused, then ducked his head. “TommyInnit.”

If Puffy wasn’t already crouching, she’d probably have fallen over. “Oh,” she said blankly. “I . . . that explains a lot, actually.”

Blue-- *Tommy* watched her warily, legs half-bent as though he was ready to run at a moment’s notice. Puffy forced herself to smile. “I know you,” she told the child. “You’re a good kid. Bit chaotic, but everyone loves you.” The last part was a bit of a stretch, but toddler Tommy didn’t need to know that.

“Really?” Tommy asked, his eyes narrowed. “What about Dream?”

Puffy's mouth went dry. "Dream?" she asked. Green startled and shrunk behind Tommy. Puffy stared at him.

Oh. Oh Prime.

The other kid was *Dream*. Whoever they'd last run into had probably tried to kill him, given that they were near L'Manberg territory. Puffy forced herself to smile.

"Dream wasn't. . . friends with a lot of people," she said delicately. "He did some things that some people didn't like."

"Are you one of 'em?" Tommy demanded. Puffy shook her head.

"He's my duckling," she said. At the confused looks she received, she added, "My friend. It's an inside joke, because I mother-hen him a lot."

Dream blinked. "Oh." He shifted uncomfortably. "Um. Can you. . . can you hide us?"

Tommy's head whipped around. "*Dream!*" he hissed, then clapped his hands over his mouth and glanced at Puffy.

Puffy grinned. "It's okay, kid. I promised I wouldn't hurt you, and Dream and I are-- were good friends."

Tommy eyed her suspiciously but relaxed slightly, lowering his hands. "Dream," he whispered. "Dream, we can't trust 'er."

"But I'm hungry," Dream whispered back. As if on cue, his stomach growled. "I dun' wanna keep running forever."

Tommy looked between Puffy and Dream, clearly torn. Puffy waited patiently, keeping a gentle smile on her face. After several tense seconds, Tommy finally caved.

"Fine," he snapped. He jabbed a finger at Puffy. "But-- but if you try to--"

"I won't," Puffy swore. "I promise."

Tommy squinted at her like he was assessing her trustworthiness. At last he nodded sharply, crossing his arms.

"Okay," he agreed, with all the pomp and self-importance of a king bestowing amnesty upon his subjects. "Now take us to the food."

73. toddler tales, pt. 5

Private Messaging: awesamdude

<CaptainPuffy>: sma

*<CaptainPuffy>: *asm*

*<CaptainPuffy>: *SAM*

<awesamdude>: what?

<CaptainPuffy>: i need help

<awesamdude>: Are you in danger?

<CaptainPuffy>: no, no nothing like that

<CaptainPuffy>: i need help w something else

<awesamdude>: with what?

<CaptainPuffy>: okay this is going to sound really weird

<CaptainPuffy>: but

<CaptainPuffy>: i accidentally acquired two children and i have no idea what to do

<awesamdude>: what

<awesamdude>: how did you

awesamdude is typing. . .

<awesamdude>: children???

<CaptainPuffy>: toddlers, to be exact

<awesamdude>: Please tell me you're joking

<CaptainPuffy>: sam would I ever joke about there being kids on the server

<CaptainPuffy>: especially given how the other kids have been doing

<awesamdude>: point

<awesamdude>: . . . so there are toddlers on the server.

<CaptainPuffy>: not,,, exactly

<awesamdude>: ?

<CaptainPuffy>: argh how do I put this

<CaptainPuffy>: okay so

CaptainPuffy is typing. . .

<awesamdude>: you've been typing for a minute, you good?

<CaptainPuffy>: dream and tommy are the children

<CaptainPuffy>: they got turned into kids

<CaptainPuffy>: amnesiac kids

<CaptainPuffy>: they don't remember anything past the age of three

<awesamdude>: .

<awesamdude>: they what.

<CaptainPuffy>: yeah

<CaptainPuffy>: somehow

<awesamdude>: no seriously what.

<CaptainPuffy>: they're a handful

<CaptainPuffy>: dream got hyper after I fed them dessert

<CaptainPuffy>: kid was bouncing off the walls

<CaptainPuffy>: literally

<CaptainPuffy>: I'm talking pro parkour moves here

<CaptainPuffy>: nearly gave me a heart attack

<awesamdude>: puffy

<awesamdude>: why would you give them sugar

<CaptainPuffy>: BECAUSE

CaptainPuffy is typing. . .

<CaptainPuffy>: I have no excuse

<CaptainPuffy>: but anyways I NEED HLEP SAM

<CaptainPuffy>: i'm not the 1st person the kids ran into and i'm pretty sure someone tried to kill them

<CaptainPuffy>: or dream, at least

<CaptainPuffy>: my money's on the cabinet. found the kids near lmanberg territory and you know how they feel about dream

<awesamdude>: puffy

<CaptainPuffy>: I don't know what to do sam

<CaptainPuffy>: do I take care of them? do I try to turn them back?

<CaptainPuffy>: I don't even know if I can keep them safe

<awesamdude>: are they at your house?

<CaptainPuffy>: yeah

<awesamdude>: heading over now. We'll talk more when I get there.

82. toddler tales, pt. 6

"I have two more invis pots, I'll be fine--"

"Invis pots last for eight minutes," Philza snapped. His wings flared out with agitation.

"Don't. You'll get yourself killed."

"They're *out there*, Phil-- I can't just--"

A knock on the door interrupted their argument. Both men froze, heads snapping around to the entrance.

"Hide," Philza breathed. Technoblade obeyed instantly, disappearing into the adjacent bedroom. Philza heard the closet doors creak. Taking a deep, steadying, breath, he turned to the door.

"Who's there?" he called.

"Tubbo," the person on the other side answered. Philza's heart sank.

Tubbo. Why was he here? Had he discovered Technoblade's presence? Had he found out about Tommy and Dream?

Setting his shoulders, Philza rearranged his face into an expression of cold annoyance and opened the door. "Mister President," he greeted, careful to keep his gaze on Tubbo's face even as he scanned his surroundings in his peripheral vision. It appeared that Tubbo was alone this time - no butcher army in sight. Which probably meant he wasn't here for Technoblade.

That left two options: either he was here for Philza, or he was here because of the kids. Neither were reassuring.

Tubbo's expression had flattened slightly at Philza's subtle hostility. "Philza Minecraft," he said. "Can I come in?"

Philza smiled, sharp and unfriendly. “Do I have a choice? Or are you just going to barge in like you did last time?”

“Yeah, you get to decide.”

“Then no.”

Tubbo tilted his head. “Alright then, I’ll make it quick. Do you happen to know how Dream and Tommy got turned into kids?”

Shit. Shit, shit, *shit*. Only years of practice allowed Philza to keep his posture relaxed. He shoved down his rising alarm and instead furrowed his brows, pasting an incredulous expression on his face. “. . . What?”

Tubbo scrutinized him. Philza forced his bristling feathers to lay flat. “What?” he repeated. “They-- Dream and Tommy got turned into kids?”

Tubbo hummed. “Quackity and I ran into them,” he said casually. Philza couldn’t keep his next breath from catching in his throat. “Wonder how two toddlers managed to get through the Nether and into L’Manberg.”

“Wait, wait, back up--” Philza grimaced. “Dream and Tommy. They’re-- what the fuck? How?”

Tubbo tilted his head, mouth thinning into a neutral line. “I think you know.”

Philza narrowed his eyes, fighting to keep his panic off his face. “I really don’t.”

“Funny,” Tubbo said mildly. “Dream mentioned a ‘Mister Minecraft’ when we talked to him. Something about a ‘kidnapper’, too.”

Well, shit. “. . . I don’t--”

“Stop lying.” Tubbo straightened, eyes cold. “I care about Tommy--”

“Yeah, you exiled him,” Philza muttered. “Real caring.”

Tubbo faltered, then steeled himself. “I *care* about Tommy, and if this is some ploy to hurt him--”

“Look, mate,” Philza interrupted. “I didn’t turn Tommy or Dream into kids.”

“But you know what happened,” Tubbo said.

Philza considered his options. On one hand, he could deny it - continue the charade. He was already on house arrest; Tubbo probably wouldn’t do worse without Quackity here to boss him around. He’d be breaking out later tonight anyway. On the other hand, he could tell the truth; clear things up and probably gain enough trust to work with Tubbo on the issue.

He chose option one. “I really don’t.”

The corners of Tubbo's mouth turned down. "Tell me how they got shrunk," he said at last. "I won't ask you how you know. Just-- tell me. Please."

Philza paused. He took a mental step back and looked, really *looked* at Tubbo. The teenager seemed cold, calculating, his stance firm. But his hands were folded behind his back-- hidden, so Philza wouldn't see that they were shaking. His eyes were just the slightest bit too wide, his face just the slightest bit too pale.

No, Tubbo wasn't calm at all. He was desperate. Worried. Worried about Tommy's safety.

Philza let out a slow exhale, allowing his tense wings to relax. "Alright. It was a potion mishap."

Tubbo blinked. "A. . . potion mishap?"

"Tommy was making a potion," Philza said shortly. "Dream surprised him and he threw the half-finished bottle at him. Got himself caught in the effect."

"So it wasn't because someone was trying to kill him," Tubbo said.

Philza shook his head. "As far as I know, no."

Tubbo nodded. For a single moment, he relaxed, slumping ever-so-slightly forward, letting his presidential façade crumble. Philza was reminded, suddenly, that Tubbo was still a teenager. A teenager who carried the weight of a nation, and then some, on his shoulders.

But just as quickly as it had fallen, the façade returned. Tubbo drew his shoulders back and then Philza was once again looking at the Third President of L'Manberg.

"Thank you," was all he said. Without another word, he turned and left. Philza stood watching in the doorway until he disappeared from view, then retreated back into his house. Shutting the door, he closed his eyes and rested his forehead on the smooth wood.

The bedroom door creaked open behind him. "Phil? You good?"

". . . I don't know, mate. I don't know."

107. *toddler tales, pt. 7*

Sam had been staring at them for the last five minutes.

Tommy aggressively chomped on a spoonful of cereal and glared right back. Dream, sitting next to him, continued to inhale his pancakes. Sam blinked, realized he'd been staring, and hastily looked down at his plate.

He had barely touched his breakfast. Puffy kept nudging him, trying to start up a conversation, but her attempts always fell flat. The two children were too busy eating to respond, and Sam just gave stilted, monosyllabic answers.

Tommy dug his spoon into his cereal and took another bite. An odd tingling feeling spread through his legs. He shifted in his seat, swinging his feet in an attempt to wake them up, only to accidentally kick Dream in the ankle. The other child choked on his pancakes, prompting a look of alarm from the two adults. Dream managed to pacify them between coughs, then washed the pancakes down with his apple juice. When he'd reasonably recovered, he kicked Tommy in the leg. Tommy tried to retaliate, but Dream shifted so he was out of reach. Scowling, Tommy took another bite of his cereal.

His body *burned*.

He yelped, falling out of his chair. Sam and Puffy shot to their feet, alarm clear on their faces. Tommy tried to tell them he was fine, but it came out as a strangled scream.

It *hurt*. He could hear something snapping, accompanied with starbursts of pain that made his vision white out for a moment. He threw his head back, cracking it against the floor in a desperate attempt to knock himself out.

All at once, the pain disappeared, leaving Tommy shuddering on the floor. He groaned, wincing as his raw throat protested. Everything ached.

"Tommy?" Oh hey, it was Dream. "A-are you okay?"

Tommy closed his eyes and didn't reply. Cloth rustled above him.

"Did he pass out?" Sam's voice was strained. A hand slid under his head, and Tommy moaned in protest as his skull began throbbing.

"Shh," Puffy murmured. "Just moving you to the couch."

Someone lifted him up, and then the world faded to black.

Tommy blinked awake to the sight of Puffy's ceiling.

"You're awake!" Tommy raised his head to see Dream, who was bouncing up and down on the other end of the couch. "You've been out for two hours. Puffy and Sam're in the kitchen."

"I feel like shit," Tommy croaked. "What the fuck happened?"

"You passed out."

"Thanks, Sherlock. *Why* did I pass out?"

Dream remained silent. Tommy sat up, grimacing as his muscles protested. His clothes felt. . . different, now. Tight, when they'd been hanging off of him before.

Wait.

He squinted down at himself, then raised a hand. The pudgy fingers had elongated and become a bit thinner.

“What the fuck,” he said flatly. Then, louder, “What the *fuck*. ”

He'd grown. He was growing. Granted, it was at a very abnormal rate, but he was *growing*.

". . . Yeah. That's why."

Tommy turned to Dream. Dream, who still looked like a toddler. "You didn't grow."

Dream made a show of looking down at himself, then back at Tommy. "Nope," he chirped. "I think it's because you had milk in your cereal."

". . . Milk," Tommy deadpanned. "Are you fucking serious."

Dream dropped the childish act to grimace. “Yeah, it was pretty dumb of us not to think of that.”

In any other situation, it would have been hilarious. As it was, Tommy was mentally berating himself for not trying milk to fix whatever mess he'd made with his potions. It was *so fucking simple*.

“ . . . Tommy?”

“Tommy. Yes. That’s me.” Tommy stared down at his hands. His body appeared to be around five or six years old now. “What the fuck?”

“You fell out of your chair and started screaming,” Dream supplied unhelpfully. “It was very dramatic.”

Tommy groaned, burying his face in his hands. “Why did we never think of milk?”

“To be fair, none of the normal potions physically change people. I guess we assumed that milk only worked for particle effects.”

"But *milk*?! Why didn't we think of that?!"

"Shh!" Dream yelped, but it was already too late. Rapid footsteps heralded Puffy and Sam's arrival.

“Tommy! You’re awake!”

“Hi,” Tommy greeted, mind half on the conversation. The other half was still on *why the fuck didn't we think about milk?* “Yes. I’m awake. And bigger. This is bullshit.”

Sam and Puffy blinked at him. Tommy realized too late that he wasn’t acting very child-like.

“Shit, I mean-- *fuck*--”

“Fuck!” Dream repeated happily, like the bastard he was. Sam made a strangled noise while Puffy tried to cobble her composure back together. With limited success, of course, but Tommy gave her points for an attempt.

“Tommy, do you-- what do you remember?”

“You’re Puffy. Uh, and Sam.” Tommy scrunched his nose, hastily donning his ‘I am a harmless small child’ act. “But Wilby was there too, and his dad, and-- and I didn't remember you when I was there. I think. How did I get home? Why am I back?”

The two adults exchanged glances “Wilby?” Puffy asked.

“Wilbur. My brother.” Tommy scowled. “I remember you an’ Dream, but I remember Wilby at the same time-- what the fuck is happening to me?!”

“Two sets of memories,” Sam realized. “He-- you have two sets of memories. You’re growing again, and you’re getting your memories back.”

“But why is Dream still small?! Why did I get bigger?!”

Both adults looked at Dream, who was watching them with wide, curious eyes. “Um,” Sam started, and didn’t say anything else.

“We. . . don’t know yet,” Puffy admitted. When Tommy’s face twisted into what looked like the beginnings of a temper tantrum, she rushed to placate him. “But we’ll figure it out! You said your-- er, kidnapper-- told you you were turned into kids, right? Maybe they know something! Do you know their name?”

“Dunno,” Tommy grumbled. “Had pink hair, though.”

Puffy blinked. “Did she have blue eyes?”

Tommy sent her a weird look. “No? They were red. Kinda cool, actually.”

“He said we couldn’t see our friends,” Dream mumbled. “But he did take us to see Wilbur’s dad.”

“Wilbur’s dad,” Puffy repeated. Her eyes widened. “Philza? Wait, so the ‘kidnapper’--”

Sam made a noise that was something between a laugh and a groan. “. . . Technoblade.”

Three miles away, in the heart of L’Manberg, Technoblade felt a sudden sense of *foreboding*. “Hurry,” he called.

“Trying,” Philza snapped back, sawing at his ankle monitor with renewed aggression. “This fuckin’-- *plastic*--”

The band snapped under the blade of the dagger. Philza wasted no time tossing it away, shoving his foot back into his boot without bothering to put his sock back on. Technoblade handed him a sack and a splash potion of invisibility. Philza tossed the bag into his inventory, then turned to Technoblade.

“We have sixteen minutes. You ready?”

Technoblade huffed. “Let’s get outta here.”

By the time Quackity arrived, they were long gone.

119. *toddler tales, pt. 8*

“Remind me why we’re running away again?”

“Why not?”

Tommy scowled, tugging his cloak a bit tighter around himself. “Puffy had food and shelter--”

“--which we can easily get ourselves--”

“--we *can’t*, because we don’t have *shit*.” Tommy kicked a stray stick. “Unless you wanna use *this* to beat a rabbit to death. Or a zombie. If we get mauled, I’m blaming you.”

Dream scowled at him and sped up. Just to be petty, Tommy began taking larger steps. His longer legs easily kept pace with Dream’s stubby ones.

Dream’s scowl deepened. “Cheater.”

“Not my fault that you didn’t want milk,” Tommy sniffed. He glanced at the conspicuous lack of civilization around them. “Where are we going?”

“Nowhere.” Tommy stopped in his tracks, sending him a *look*. Dream huffed. “Look, I was-- I stole a couple buckets of milk. I was thinking we could-- change back?”

Tommy blinked, caught off guard. “What?”

Dream sighed, scrubbing a hand through his hair. “This whole-- kid business, it’s funny but I don’t think it’s a good idea to keep going.”

Tommy frowned. “Why not?”

“It isn’t safe.”

“Are you talking about Quackity?”

“No, that’s not--” Dream sighed. “You remember when we agreed to at least *try* to keep our morals in check?”

“Yeah?” Tommy’s eyes widened. “Wait, you mean you think this thing hurts them or something?”

Dream shuffled in place. “Not any. . . worse than anything we’ve done before, but Tubbo looked. . .” he sighed. “I’m worried about what will happen if we run into more people.”

“George and Sapnap.”

“Yes.” Dream ducked his head, fingers twitching nervously. “It’s not that this isn’t fun, it is, but now that we’ve figured out how to undo it--”

“Dream,” Tommy interrupted. “Do whatever the fuck you want. You’re your own person, if you don’t want to keep this up, you don’t have to.”

Dream’s shoulders relaxed. “Okay. Yeah. I’m going to change back.”

Tommy smirked. “. . . But you’re still gonna be shorter than me--”

“Shut up.”

Quackity ran his thumb over the name engraved in the metal.

Technoblade.

After he found the discarded ankle monitor, he’d returned to the tunnel where Technoblade killed him two weeks ago. Philza was long gone, but it was likely that he’d used this same tunnel to escape, and Quackity had hoped to gather some clues. He’d found the compass lying on the ground, forgotten and seemingly broken. The metal was dented and the glass cover was scattered in fragments across the ground.

He knew this compass. It was the one he’d used to find Technoblade the first time. He’d watched through blood-streaked vision as Technoblade tore it off of his belt and shattered it beneath his heel. It had been left here, likely as a last ‘fuck you’ to him. It should have infuriated him, *would* have infuriated him if not for one thing: the lodestone wasn’t broken.

Lodestones. They were the most important part of the compass, the thing that would point it in the direction it was meant to go. Technoblade had probably meant to crush the lodestone when he’d destroyed the compass, but he’d missed.

And now Quackity had a way to track him down. Philza, too, seeing as the man had most likely joined him.

Fingers clenched tightly around the compass, the Vice President of L'Manberg spun on his heel and stalked out of the tunnel.

149. *toddler tales, pt. 9*

"Are you *sure* they'll be okay?"

Puffy sighed. "Sam. You've already asked this twice. The answer's not going to change."

"But we're leaving them all alone in the house--"

"The door's locked, they're tucked in bed and not waking up for at least another five hours. That's long enough for us to get to Philza's house and back."

"But what if they wake up and find out we're gone and go looking for us--?"

Puffy stopped in her tracks, put her hands on Sam's shoulders (with some difficulty-- the height difference was honestly ridiculous) and looked him in the eyes. "Sam. They're safe. They're going to be fine."

The creeper hybrid looked away, rubbing his forehead. "I . . . right. Sorry, just. . ." he gestured in the direction they'd come from. "They're. . . they can't defend themselves right now."

"I know. But if we want to help them, we need to do this. So *calm down*."

Sam's shoulders slumped, but he nodded to show his understanding. Puffy released him with a pat on the arm. Together, they made their way into L'Manberg, weapons stowed away but nerves on high alert. Their wariness seemed unwarranted, however, because they didn't run into a single person.

Puffy paused at the bottom of the steps, glancing back at Sam. "You ready?" she asked. Sam nodded, and together, they ascended the stairs to the entrance. The door was ajar, the edge splintered as though it had been kicked in. Puffy narrowed her eyes, then drew her sword and nudged the door open.

A man was crouched over a chest, picking through it and muttering something under his breath. Sam blinked at his back.

"Quackity?"

Quackity spun around, an easy smile sliding over his surprise. "Sam. Puffy! What brings you here?"

". . . We ran into a mini Tommy earlier, and we figured Philza would know something about it." Puffy's gaze swept over the ransacked chests, overturned furniture, and shattered glass.

"What happened here?"

"Philza didn't agree with house arrest. If you're looking for him, he's long gone by now."

Sam and Puffy exchanged glances. “Any chance you know where he went?”

“You’re in luck.” Quackity grinned, holding something up. It appeared to be a compass, cracked in places and obviously assembled from damaged parts. The needle pointed insistently in one direction. “I have a compass.”

“Ah, shit.”

Technoblade looked up from where he’d been pulling his armor off. “Phil?”

Philza turned from where he was standing by the window. “Techno, there are people outside.”

“*Heh?!*” Technoblade hurried over to the window and squinted into the snow, paling when he saw three figures in the distance. “How did they find this place? I destroyed the compass, there shouldn’t be anything leadin’ back here!” He shook himself. “Doesn’t matter. Phil, you up for a fight?”

“When am I ever not?” Phil laughed. Technoblade rolled his eyes and strapped his chestplate back into place, then began digging through a chest of potions. Philza, meanwhile, threw his armor on with all the ease of a seasoned veteran and drew a sword. As one, they turned towards the entrance-- only to stop when a knock resounded through the door.

“Oh, that’s not good,” Philza muttered.

“Technoblade?” The voice didn’t belong to any of the Butcher Army. Rather, it sounded like. . . Captain Puffy. From what Technoblade could recall, he hadn’t done anything to gain her ire - in fact, he was pretty sure they were on neutral terms, leaning towards friendliness. Why was she here? “Technoblade, are you home? We just want to talk.”

“Who’s with you?” Technoblade called back.

“Uh. Sam and--” Puffy was cut off when the doors shuddered. Technoblade grabbed Philza and dragged him back just as they flew open. On the other side, a familiar silhouette lowered its foot.

Technoblade adjusted his grip on his sword. “Quackity.”

“Technoblade. Philza,” Quackity greeted, stalking into the house. Puffy and Sam trailed after him. The creeper hybrid even had the decency to wrench the doors back into place - not that Technoblade was in any mood to appreciate it.

“Get out,” he ordered. “We’re not fightin’ in my house.”

“That’s not for you to decide.” Quackity smiled, the scar tissue cutting through his lip distorting. “Two against three. Odds aren’t in your favor.”

“You’re forgettin’ who you’re talkin’ to, Quackity.”

“Wait wait wait wait wait!” Sam stepped between Quackity and Technoblade, his trident disappearing in a flash of light. “We’re not here for a fight--”

“Shouldn’t have brought Quackity, then.”

“--we just want some answers.” Sam glanced back at the other two, an edge of desperation in his voice. “We’ll even put away our weapons! See?”

Puffy, who hadn’t been holding a weapon in the first place, raised her hands and glanced at Quackity. Quackity reluctantly lowered his axe, taking a step back as it disappeared into his inventory.

Technoblade’s eyes narrowed. At this distance, it was child’s play to summon a weapon mid-lunge and take someone’s head off. “We’re not puttin’ our weapons away.”

Quackity bristled, but Puffy intervened before he could speak. “That’s fine! That’s fine. We just want some answers.”

“What answers?”

“. . . How did Tommy and Dream turn into children?”

Technoblade felt Philza shift. He deliberately kept his gaze fixed on Puffy. “What makes you think I know?”

“Tommy told us about his kidnapper,” was the dry answer. Technoblade lowered his sword so he could raise one hand to his face.

“Of *course*,” he muttered, then leveled a glower at them. “Look, if I tell you, will you leave me alone?”

“Yes--”

“Wasn’t askin’ you.” Technoblade pointed a clawed finger at Quackity. “He’s gotta agree before I tell you.”

Quackity bared his teeth, but he didn’t draw a weapon, which was a good sign in Technoblade’s opinion. “*Fine*,” he ground out. “Tell us what happened to Tommy and we’ll get out of your fucking hair.”

Technoblade stared at him for a long moment. Quackity raised his chin and met his gaze with a scowl. There was a good chance the duck hybrid was lying, but on the off chance that he wasn’t. . .

Technoblade really wasn’t in the mood for a fight today.

“Listen, I wasn’t there when it happened. I was out huntin’, came back and found two toddlers in my house. Workin’ theory is that Tommy messed up a potion, threw it at Dream,

and got both of them turned into kids.”

“Oh,” Sam breathed, like he'd just received Enlightenment. “The *milk*.”

Before Technoblade could ask what *that* meant, Quackity drew his axe. Technoblade and Philza raised their own weapons in retaliation, while Puffy and Sam backed up. “Woah woah woah *wait*,” Puffy protested, raising her hands. “Quackity, what are you doing?!”

Quackity ignored them, his lips drawing back into a sneer. “Okay, fuck this. Technoblade. This ends *today*.”

Technoblade had expected Quackity to go back on the deal, but he'd really hoped to avoid a fight. Oh well. “You couldn’t beat me last time. What makes you think you can beat me now?”

Quackity opened his mouth to reply, only to be interrupted by something slamming against the door. “YEET!” a muffled voice screamed outside. A moment later, the doors of the house came crashing down. Dream stormed in, decked out in full netherite and wielding an axe and shield.

Technoblade blinked, a protest against property damage dying on his lips. “You grew up,” he said instead.

“I drank milk,” Dream answered. Which made no sense to Technoblade, but sure. As long as he didn’t have to deal with a toddler again.

“Dream!” Sam cried. “You-- where’s Tommy?”

Cold silence descended upon the room as the fighters realized that Tommy was nowhere in sight. Abruptly, Quackity raised his axe.

“Where is he?” he snarled, advancing on Dream. “What the *fuck* did you do to him?”

“Woah woah woah!” Dream backpedaled, raising his shield to ward off a blow. “Tommy’s fine! We separated before I changed back--”

“Like *hell* I’ll believe that--”

The window shattered. Quackity whipped his shield up, but it was useless against the mist that engulfed the room. Shouts of alarm were swallowed up in the colorful smoke. When it dissipated, Tommy poked his head through the broken window, grinning.

The grin slid off his face when he saw the six toddlers scattered around the room, all blinking dazedly down at the giant pieces of armor that surrounded them. Slowly, toddler Dream turned to Tommy.

“Oops?” Tommy whispered. “I . . . I thought it was Paralysis. . .”

“I am going to kill you,” Dream informed him.

“Fair.”

remix (complete)

Chapter Summary

TLDR: The discduo roleswap loop.

Alternative ends linked in the end notes!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

52. *remix, pt. 1*

Tommy slammed a picture down onto the courtroom table. It was an image of George's burning house. A picture of Dream giving the camera a thumbs up, which had obviously been cut out of another picture, was glued into the space next to the house.

Tommy pointed at the paper. "Caught in 4K, bitch!"

A long moment of silence. Dream stared down at the picture, expression hidden behind his mask. Tubbo cringed and waited for the outburst.

"Oh, no," Dream said dully. "You caught me. I lied, I burned down George's house. Guess this means I have to go into exile."

"What?" Tubbo blurted.

"I am hereby exiled from L'Manberg, and the Dream SMP, until the fourth of January next year," Dream droned on. "As the owner of this server, I'm handing it over to Tommy until I return."

"*What?*" Tubbo repeated.

"As the temporary holder of the SMP," Tommy added, grinning widely, "I'll escort Dream into exile and check in with him occasionally to make sure he stays put."

"Wait, wait, wait," Tubbo protested. "I'm-- hold on a second--"

Dream turned to him. "Is there a problem?"

Tubbo shoved down his instinctive fear of the man and stood his ground. "You-- *what?*"

"Dream burned down George's house," Tommy explained gleefully. "So he's getting exiled."

Tubbo stared at them, torn. On one hand, he was happy that Dream wasn't pressuring him to exile Tommy anymore. On the other hand, *what the fuck?* The 'evidence' that had been the basis for Dream's decision to exile himself was so obviously fake that even a *three-year-old* would be able to tell. And Dream had been insisting that Tommy had been guilty five minutes ago-- why the hell did he suddenly change his story?

None of this made sense. Tubbo glanced helplessly at Tommy, who winked at him. The message was obvious: *trust me*.

"Well?" Dream asked. Tubbo mutely shook his head and stepped aside.

Tommy led Dream out of the courtroom, leaving a stunned audience behind them.

"So," Dream said, staring down at the exile beach. "What do we do now?"

Tommy shrugged. "Whatever we want, I guess."

Dream hummed. "Any ideas?"

A long moment of silence. "I've actually been thinking about this since the body-switch loop," Tommy admitted. "But, uh, Dream, wanna try being the good guy for once?"

Dream straightened in surprise and turned to him. "What?"

Tommy shrugged uncomfortably. "Stop me if this sounds weird, okay, but I wanna understand what was going through your head in loop zero."

Dream's face went blank. "Trust me, you don't."

Tommy rolled his eyes. "Oh, shut it with your stupid fucking self-hatred shit. I was just thinking-- you're always, like, the bad guy in these loops--"

"Not always."

"Almost always," Tommy amended. "And nobody in L'Manberg has ever liked you except for that one loop where you literally hit Wilbur over the head with a peace treaty. This loop just gave us, like, the perfect setup for. . . for a roleswap, or whatever the fuck it's called."

Dream swallowed. "That. . . that doesn't seem very, uh. Fun. Not for. . . not for you, at least."

"Probably not," Tommy admitted. "But. . . it's a better chance for us to understand each other or some shit, right? We're. . . we're gonna be stuck in these loops for. . . whoever the fuck knows how long." He grimaced. "I'm not-- I'm not saying that we're gonna do *exactly* what we did in loop zero, because like *hell* am I ever gonna--" he gestured sharply at the beach,

then took a deep breath and calmed himself down. "I'm just saying, like. . . the general plotline. I'm the owner of the SMP, you're in exile. . ."

"And I'd fight you for the discs?" Dream asked dryly.

Tommy pointed at him. "Okay, first of all, those are *my* discs, fuck off. Second of all, I was thinking, like, your mask or something."

A pause. Dream looked at Tommy, then back down at the beach.

"Okay."

"Okay?" Tommy repeated, raising an eyebrow. "Just like that?"

Dream shrugged. "Yeah. Okay."

Tommy frowned. "Look, man, if you're agreeing because you feel guilty or some shit--"

"I'm not," Dream interrupted. He offered a wry half-smile. "I *am* pretty curious. Why not give it a try?"

A pause. Tommy looked down at the beach. "Alright, then," he muttered. "Let's do this shit."

66. remix, pt. 2 ([see previous parts of this loop here](#))

"You look like shit."

"I didn't notice," Dream replied dryly. Tommy scowled.

"No, seriously. Why the hell are you so thin?"

"I've been skipping meals."

"*Why?*"

Dream shrugged. "Might as well get the full experience."

"I-- Dream, what the fuck." Tommy shook his head. "No. No, no, fuck that. There are *mobs* out here, Dream, and if you're not eating enough then you're gonna get hurt."

"So? I have three lives left." Dream didn't meet Tommy's gaze. "It's not quite what happened to you, but--"

"No, stop," Tommy snapped. "This isn't-- this isn't fucking *right*--"

"This has to look realistic, Tommy." Dream glanced up at the gathering clouds. "'Sides, it's not so bad. At least I can see the sky here."

Tommy's next protest died on his lips. "... Fine," he bit out after a long moment of silence. "But you better not die on me, okay? I don't care if you have three-- three canon lives, just-- fucking *don't*."

Dream's lips quirked into a small smile. "I'll try not to. Now c'mon, let's get inside before it starts raining."

Tubbo was worried.

Ever since Dream had been exiled, Tommy had been growing steadily more distant. He rarely showed up to cabinet meetings, instead disappearing for days at a time. When questioned as to his whereabouts, he'd claim that he was 'making sure the green bastard doesn't try anything'. He was adamant that nobody visited Dream, insisting that the man was dangerous, that he'd play mind games with anyone who talked to him.

Tubbo had experienced said mind games firsthand, so he was all too happy to stay away. The problem was, he *knew* Tommy wasn't immune to Dream's manipulation. Tommy spent so much time with Dream nowadays. Who knew what the man was doing to him?

These thoughts were what led to Tubbo standing in front of the nether portal, fidgeting nervously with his tie. He'd been here several times already, having followed Tommy on his third trip to visit Dream. Each time, he'd chickened out and gone back without entering the portal.

But Tommy hadn't been back in L'Manberg for two weeks now, the longest he'd ever been away since they retook it from Schlatt. That was. . . concerning.

Taking a deep breath, Tubbo squared his shoulders and stepped into the portal.

The first thing he noticed was the smell, the scent of rain and burnt wood choking the air. The next thing he noticed were the ruins.

The area he was standing in had once been a forest, if the charred tree stumps were any indication. The ground was carpeted with a thick mat of soggy ash, the occasional ember flickering in the soot like a dying star. Ten feet away, the burnt plants gave way to a mix of charred dirt and melted sand, which ended abruptly where the ocean began. An eerie silence hung heavy over the beach, not dissimilar to that of a graveyard.

Tubbo stepped out into the open. Through the hazy air, he could see the charred skeleton of a house. Its stone foundations were blackened and streaked with pale ash, scaffolding burnt nearly completely away.

A single, familiar figure stood in front of it. He was facing away from Tubbo, head upturned towards the remains of the house.

“Tommy?”

“Tubbo,” Tommy said. His voice was cold. Tubbo hesitated, a chill passing down his spine. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“I haven’t seen you in two weeks,” Tubbo replied as he came to a stop five feet away. “I was worried.”

“You shouldn’t be here,” Tommy repeated. He turned around. Tubbo stiffened, horror sinking into his bones.

A familiar mask was strapped over Tommy’s face, an onyx smile etched into its surface. One edge of it was chipped and slightly singed, but the rest of it was pristine as ever, an eerie bone-white that glinted under the dying sunlight.

“T-Tommy?” Tubbo breathed. “Why. . . why are you wearing that?”

Tommy tilted his head, fingers coming up to brush the mask. “Oh, this? I took it from Dream.”

Tubbo swallowed. “And. . . and where is Dream?”

Tommy hummed. “He ran away.”

Tubbo blinked. “Ran. . . away? From exile? Does-- does that mean he’s in the SMP? In L’Manberg?”

“No.” Tommy turned back to the house. “He left the beach. He’s not supposed to leave the beach.”

Tubbo frowned. “It’s fine as long as he stays out of the mainland, Tommy.”

“But if he’s not here, I can’t keep an eye on him,” Tommy snapped. He kicked a piece of rubble with his foot. “And if I don’t keep an eye on him, who knows what the fuck he’ll get up to. I’m gonna go hunt him down.”

Tubbo frowned. “I-- wouldn’t it make more sense to stay back in L’Manberg and defend it? Tommy, you’re the vice, we need you back here. We can-- we can send a search party after Dream--”

“No, Tubbo.” Tubbo took a step back as Tommy stepped forward, his fingers curling into fists. “You don’t understand-- the shit he says. I know his tricks-- if you send a search party out there, he’ll turn them to his side with some fucking pity story.”

“We need you back in L’Manberg!” Tubbo protested. “I know you’re worried about Dream, but--”

“I’m going after him.” It wasn’t a request, it was a statement. “Just fuckin’ *try* to stop me, Tubbo. I dare you.”

Tubbo felt his heart sink into his stomach. “Tommy, please,” he started. Tommy snorted.

“*Tommy, please,*” he parroted, and Tubbo got the distinct impression that he was rolling his eyes behind his mask. “Prime, you’ve grown soft. Either get a backbone and stop me yourself or go back to L’Manberg. Don’t just stand there looking pathetic.”

Tubbo said nothing.

“Don’t know what I expected you to do,” Tommy muttered. He turned away. “Well, *Mister President*, I’ll be back as soon as I track Dream down. Don’t come after me.”

He disappeared into the fog, leaving Tubbo alone in the smoking ruins.

Technoblade held his sword up to the firelight, squinting, before lowering it and running the whetstone over it again. The *shhk* of metal against stone and the crackling of the fire washed over him, mixing with the low murmur of voices in his head. For the first time in a while, he felt calm. Content.

A knock shattered his momentary peace.

Technoblade narrowed his eyes at the door. It was snowing something fierce at the moment, the wind battering the windows and whisking freshly fallen flakes off the ground. Nobody should have been out in weather like this.

He calmly rose to his feet, newly-sharpened sword in hand, and stalked to the door. “Who’s there?” he called. There might have been an answer, but the voice was so faint the words were lost in the wind. Technoblade let out a huff and opened the door.

A man was standing at his doorstep, clothes and hair laced with ice. The tips of his fingers were nearly white - a sign of skin-deep frostbite. His face was unfamiliar-- gaunt and pale, with a dusting of freckles and a small scar across the bridge of his nose. His tattered hoodie, however, was *very* recognizable. Technoblade would know that shade of green anywhere.

“... Dream?”

“Hi,” Dream croaked, right before he toppled over and passed out at Technoblade’s feet.

77. remix, pt. 3

Fundy grimaced, glancing over his shoulder. If Tubbo caught him in here, there would be *questions*, and Fundy wasn’t sure if he could come up with a convincing lie. He had to do this quickly.

Pulling open another cabinet, his eyes fell on *Court Documents*. Convenient. He snatched the folder up and rifled through it, pulling out the ‘evidence’ Tommy had used to pin the burning of George’s house on Dream. A glance-over proved that it was the real deal, and he quickly shoved it into his inventory before covering up all traces of his presence in the office. He had just shut the cabinet when the office door opened behind him, and he whipped around, forcing his bristling tail to relax.

“Fundy?” Tubbo blinked at him. “What are you doing in my office?”

“I was looking for you,” Fundy lied.

Tubbo waited, obviously expecting Fundy to explain. When the fox hybrid failed to do so, he raised an eyebrow. “. . . and why were you looking for me?”

“To talk about something.”

The second eyebrow rose to join the first. “And that would be. . .?”

“I forgot.” Fundy met Tubbo’s skeptical gaze head-on, praying to all heavens that Tubbo wouldn’t notice his shaking hands.

“You forgot,” Tubbo repeated.

Fundy bobbed his head. “Uh-huh. Yep. You know me. Always forgetting things.”

Tubbo held his gaze for a moment longer, then snorted and rolled his eyes. “I think that’s Ranboo.”

“Never know, his memory problems might be contagious.” Fundy smiled sheepishly. “I think I’m gonna go home. Some sleep might help.”

“You do that,” Tubbo muttered, crossing the room and falling into his office chair with a huff. “I’ll be in here doing *taxes*.”

Fundy winced sympathetically. “Good luck.”

“Thanks.” Tubbo began sorting through his papers, a clear act of dismissal. Fundy fled the room as quickly as he could.

Fundy never thought that he’d one day be stealing a confidential court document, but it was necessary. Tubbo hadn’t said much about what occurred during his talk with Tommy a week ago, but the first thing he’d done at the next meeting was to instate Quackity as interim vice-president, which basically meant that he’d be the vice until Tommy finished. . . whatever he needed to do.

Which added onto the list of Very Suspicious Things pertaining to Tommy. Following the court case, the L'Manberg Cabinet (minus Tommy) had gathered to discuss the proceedings. Quackity had made an offhanded joke about the possibility of Tommy blackmailing Dream, which was quickly brushed off. After all, what could Tommy possibly threaten Dream with?

Thing was, when Fundy had actually taken time to sit back and review the court case, he'd realized that the joke had more merit than expected. It would explain Dream's sudden change in behavior and his subdued temperament for the remainder of the trial. Fundy was still blanking on what Tommy could have blackmailed Dream with, but everything else lined up. Which was why he'd snuck into Tubbo's office to take a peek at the court documents.

Safe in the confines of his home, Fundy squinted at the paper he'd stolen. Dream had only changed his story after he'd stared at the picture for a good ten seconds, and though that could have been chalked up to him being dumbfounded by the sheer ridiculousness of it all, Fundy suspected that there was more to it.

Yup, just as he thought. Right at the edge of the picture, inscribed in ink--

::L·JL·JSL:::TJ7 | 4S! R. !;fS|| SfJ7J -I. J:: L:f4L.

Gah. His Enchantment was pretty rusty. *Rme--* was that a m? No, it was a e. Right, the next letter was m. He'd gotten them mixed up. And that was a t, not a s. . . so the entire thing said.
..

Remember what I said. Play along. Or else.

Fundy's elation at his successful translation disappeared in a flash. His ears pressed flat against his skull. Because no matter how he looked at it, that phrasing seemed pretty threatening.

What the hell was Tommy doing?

85. remix, pt. 4

"Dream."

"Hi, Technoblade."

"Do you remember what I told you when you woke up?"

"Yeah."

"And what was it?"

"To stay indoors because I almost froze to death."

"And where are you?"

“Outdoors.”

“So why, after I *specifically* told you *not* to go outside, did you go outside?”

“... It’s snowing. I don’t get to see snow a lot.”

Technoblade huffed. “If you want to see snow, look at it through the window. Now get inside before you freeze again.”

“Aye aye,” Dream muttered, letting Technoblade usher him back into the house. He shook the snow off his boots and unclasped his fur cape, tossing it onto the hook by the door.

Technoblade moved straight for one of the potion stands, leaning over and tapping the glass bottles with one long, pointy nail. “All good,” he grunted, then straightened and jabbed a finger at the kitchen. “Go eat.”

“I’m not hungry.”

Technoblade leveled him with a flat stare. Dream raised his hands. “I’m going, I’m going.”

“And eat your carrots this time,” Technoblade called after him. “You need the nutrients.”

“The Butcher Army,” Ranboo said, eyeing the posters plastered all over the walls. “Bit... on the nose, don’t you think?”

“Ranboo,” Quackity deadpanned. “We literally have a list of people we’re going to kill. We can’t have some cutesy nickname.”

Ranboo flushed, tail waving nervously. “That’s not what I meant! I was-- I just thought it was kinda... aggressive.”

Quackity rolled his eyes and waved him off with a hand, then spun the hit list around the table and stuck his finger on the name at the top. “Anyways. Technoblade’s our first target. Are we all on the same page here?”

“Kinda hard not to be,” Ranboo muttered. Quackity snorted, then snapped the hit list shut. Without warning he pulled a diamond axe from his inventory and slammed it on the table. The other three jumped.

“The plan is simple.” Quackity looked around the room, meeting their eyes with a steady gaze. “We find and we kill Technoblade. We bring him to justice.” He paused. “... The only issue we have right now is how the fuck we’re gonna find him.”

Fundy managed to pass his snicker off as a very unconvincing cough. “Any-- *ahem*-- any ideas?”

“I think. . . Philza,” Tubbo said. “He’s been-- he’s good friends with Technoblade, isn’t he?”

Quackity’s eyes narrowed. “You’re telling me,” he said slowly, “That *Philza Minecraft*, a citizen of L’Manberg. . . has been conspiring with Technoblade.”

Tubbo shifted. “I mean. . . I’ve seen him sending out books and things. With his crows. Dunno who else he’d be sending ‘em to.”

Quackity stared at him for a tense moment. Without warning he spun on his heel and stalked towards the hidden door. “I’m going to knock his door down,” he seethed.

“Wait, wait, wait!” Tubbo slid in front of him, slightly panicked. “Wait, Big Q! If we just barge in there, we’ll freak him out!”

“What the hell has he been doing with *Technoblade*?!” Quackity demanded. He tried to step around Tubbo, but Tubbo threw his arms out.

“Wait,” he repeated. “If we go in there calm and collected, he’ll be more likely to cooperate with us.”

Quackity stared at him for a long moment, then exhaled sharply and lowered his axe. “Fine. We’ll talk to him. *Peacefully*.”

Tubbo slowly stepped aside, watching as Quackity turned back to the others. “Is everyone ready? Got your gear?”

“I, uh, don’t have an axe,” Ranboo said. Fundy handed him his own without a word. “Thanks.”

Quackity surveyed the room one final time, then nodded sharply and jerked his head towards the door. “Let’s move out.”

92. *remix, pt. 5*

“And *stay inside*.”

“I can fight,” Dream protested as Technoblade pulled open another chest. “You *know* how good I am at PvP--”

“--and you’re still recoverin’ from malnutrition, burns, and a bruised rib,” Technoblade deadpanned. “You’re not fightin’.”

“It’s four versus one! You can’t fight them off by yourself!”

The chest slammed shut. Dream took a step back as Technoblade turned to him, hands full of potions.

“Dream,” he said. “You know you can’t fight off either. You’d be dead weight.”

“I can handle it--”

“I don’t have time for this,” Technoblade muttered, brushing past him. “Dream, I’m serious. Stay inside. *Hide*. If they’re here to kill me, chances are they’ll want to kill you too. I can’t defend both of us.”

Dream hesitated. “But. . .”

“The invis potions are in the chests on the far right, middle row,” Technoblade called. “Grab some and get down to the basement. I’ll call you up when it’s safe.”

The door slammed shut behind him. Dream was left standing alone in the room, gnawing on the inside of his cheek.

They were switching roles, but they were only loosely following each others' scripts. Tommy wouldn’t help Technoblade escape. Which meant that if Dream didn’t interfere--

He set his shoulders and turned towards the chests. Where did Technoblade keep his weapons again. . .?

“TECHNOBLADE! STOP! I HAVE CARL!”

The piglin hybrid whipped around. His fingers curled tighter around his axe when his gaze landed on Quackity, who was sitting astride Carl and holding an axe to the horse’s neck.

“You get away from that horse, Quackity,” he snarled.

“Move away from the others,” Quackity snapped back. “Move away, or I’m gonna kill him.”

“Leave the horse out of this!” Quackity shifted the axe an inch closer to Carl’s neck and Technoblade instantly complied, eyes wide with panic. “Fine! Okay! Just-- leave Carl alone!”

“And drop your weapons.”

Technoblade hesitated. Dream inhaled, exhaled, and *moved*.

An arrow sprouted from Quackity’s hand. The duck hybrid reeled back, howling, the axe tumbling from his spasming fingers and landing in the snow. In that same moment, invisible fingers hooked around the back of his shirt and yanked him off of Carl. Quackity landed on his back in the snow and lashed out with his axe, but Dream had already danced out of range, grabbing hold of Carl’s reins and vaulting onto the horse. Carl reared, startled, then dashed off in Technoblade’s direction. Dream yanked hard and managed to slow the horse down, just in time to avoid running the piglin hybrid over. Technoblade wasted no time sliding in front of them, sword drawn and wary gaze fixed on the Butcher Army.

“I thought I told you to stay inside,” he hissed.

“You were going to lose,” Dream retorted. “Who’s gonna feed me if you die?”

“Who’s there?!” Quackity shouted, gaze darting back and forth. He spun in a circle, axe slashing wildly. “Who?!”

Dream gritted his teeth and dismounted from Carl, drawing his own axe. Technoblade’s eyes darted to it.

“Where’s your armor?” he muttered.

“Don’t have any,” Dream muttered back. “Just a lot of invis.”

Fundy’s fox ears flicked up. “Dream?!”

Tubbo’s head snapped towards him. “*Dream?!?*”

“I--” Fundy’s eyes narrowed. “I heard his voice.”

Dream hesitated. He probably only had twenty or so seconds left of invisibility - either he could try hitting everyone in the area with a potion and escape in the confusion. . . or he could stay and try talking the Butcher Army down.

“Dream,” Tubbo said. “He’s the invisible one, isn’t he?”

Quackity stilled. “Dream’s here?”

Dream’s stomach sunk. He took a step back, bumping into Carl. Before his eyes, his hands were reentering the visible spectrum, washed-out and faded like a ghost’s.

“Wait, that’s--” Fundy stared at him. “Where’s his mask?!”

Quackity was smiling, gleeful and full of teeth. “Tubbo,” he breathed. “Tubbo, both of them are here. We can--”

Technoblade brandished his sword, knuckles whitening as he tightened his grip. “Leave,” he snarled, “Or I’ll kill you.”

Dream swallowed as adrenaline flooded through his veins. He was fully visible now and completely armor-less. Quackity took a step forward, clearly rearing for a fight, and Dream tensed, sliding into a defensive stance. Fundy followed suit, wary gaze fixed on Technoblade.

Only Tubbo remained still, eyes dark. “Wait,” he ordered, pointing his axe at Dream. “Tell me-- what did you do to Tommy?”

Dream went still, his axe dipping. “T. . . Tommy?”

“Yes,” Tubbo said. “*Tommy*. What did you do to him?”

“What. . .” Dream shifted, a slow, burning rage flaring in his eyes. “What did *I* do to him? You think-- you think *I* did something to *him*? ”

Tubbo’s lips thinned. He said nothing.

Dream let out a sardonic laugh that was more akin to a huff. “Well,” he ground out, “Sorry to disappoint, but I didn’t do anything to him.”

Tubbo narrowed his eyes. “. . . Then what happened during exile?”

“You wouldn’t believe me even if I--”

“What did he blackmail you with?”

All eyes turned to Fundy, who raised his chin and stood his ground. “Blackmail?” Tubbo asked.

“What did he blackmail you with?” Fundy repeated, his eyes fixed on Dream. “I saw the Enchantment on the picture. He threatened you to get you to exile yourself, didn’t he?”

Dream stared at him. “You--”

“Fundy,” Quackity interrupted, his eyes narrowing. “Fundy, what the hell are you talking about?”

“The-- the picture,” Fundy said. “That Tommy submitted as evidence in court. There was a note on it in Enchantment - ‘*play along, or else*’. What did he say to you?”

Dream took a step back, skin paling to paper-white. “I. . .”

“Hold on,” Technoblade interrupted. “What’s this I’m hearin’ about blackmail?”

Quackity huffed. “Okay, you know what-- shut the fuck up. Dream, Technoblade, surrender or--”

“Wait,” Tubbo said. He lowered his axe, ignoring the noise of protest Quackity made.

“You’re saying. . . Tommy blackmailed you into exiling yourself?”

“And he damn well deserved it,” Quackity muttered.

Tubbo took a deep breath. “I went to find Tommy two weeks ago,” he said. “The place you were staying-- it was-- *gone*. Destroyed. Tommy was wearing your mask. He-- he brushed me off, basically abandoned L’Manberg so he could look for you-- he *changed*. What happened during exile, Dream?”

Dream’s mouth opened and closed soundlessly. His gaze darted back and forth. He took another step back, nearly bumping into Technoblade. Tubbo stepped forward, only to freeze when Technoblade raised his sword in warning.

“Personal space,” the piglin hybrid warned. “Back up, Mister *President*.”

“I need to know,” Tubbo protested. “What happened, Dream? Why did Tommy change?”

Dream chewed on the inside of his cheek. “If. . . if I tell you about exile, will you leave us alone?”

Tubbo hesitated. Quackity’s head snapped towards him. “Tubbo,” he said. “You can’t be serious.”

“I. . . I need to know,” Tubbo repeated. His axe disappeared with a flash of light. “Fine. I’ll call off the Butcher Army if you tell me what happened in exile.”

“Tubbo,” Quackity snapped. “Think about this for one damn second--”

“I *am* thinking about this,” Tubbo said. “And I think that at the moment, I’m more worried about Tommy than revenge.”

“It’s not just revenge, it’s L’Manberg!”

“Techno’s in retirement,” Fundy pointed out. “He still has three lives. If we drag him out and kill him, he’d probably just come back and destroy L’Manberg.”

Quackity sneered. “Since when were you all buddy-buddy with Technoblade?”

“I’m not buddy-buddy with Technoblade, I just don’t think killing him is a good idea anymore.” Fundy’s tail lashed nervously, but he met Quackity’s gaze. “Executing Techno and Dream won’t help, Quackity. If anything, it’ll make things *worse*. ”

Technoblade huffed. “That’s what I’ve been tellin’ you all along!”

Quackity gritted his teeth, whirling around to glare at Tubbo. “You’re just gonna give up on revenge?” He demanded. “Just like that? He needs to pay!”

Tubbo let out a tired sigh. “Quackity-- I’m not forgiving Technoblade. This isn’t-- this isn’t me giving up. I just. . . want to focus on the present, not the past. I’m tired of thinking about what-ifs. Something’s wrong with Tommy right here, right now, and-- and I don’t want him to become another what-if.”

Quackity stared at him.

“So no,” Tubbo continued. “I’m not giving up. I’m not forgiving Technoblade. But what happened-- it’s in the past. *Tommy* is still here. And I’m sorry if you disagree, but I think he’s more important.”

There was a moment of tense silence. Slowly, Quackity lowered his axe.

“Fine,” he grumbled. “I’ll hear Dream out, but only because of Tommy.”

Dream cleared his throat. “R-right,” he said. “Um--”

“Dream,” Technoblade cut in, “I’m not gonna stop you if you want to spill your tragic backstory to the guys tryin’ to kill us, but could you not do it on my front lawn?”

“At least I’m not inviting them into your house.”

“Don’t even try that trick with me,” Technoblade deadpanned. “They’re not welcome on my property, that’s nonnegotiable. You can talk somewhere else.”

“It’s fine,” Tubbo said before Quackity could protest. “We can-- would the forest over there work?”

Technoblade hesitated, then inclined his head. “I’m comin’ with you,” he warned.

Dream grimaced. “Techno--”

“No. Followin’ a bunch of people in bloody aprons into the woods is just *askin’* to get killed, Dream.”

“If you come with us, you’ll be doing the same thing--”

“I’m in full netherite, you’re not. I’m goin’ with you. End of story.”

Dream opened his mouth, grasping for an argument and coming up empty. He slumped. “That’s-- okay. Fine.”

“Now that you’re *done*, ” Quackity drawled, “Can we get going?”

Technoblade fixed him with an unimpressed stare before turning to Tubbo. “Well, Mister President? Lead the way.”

“Don’t call me that,” Tubbo muttered. He turned away and began moving towards the forest.

Quackity, Fundy, Technoblade, and Dream glanced at each other. Technoblade cleared his throat. “Well? Go on ahead.”

Quackity scowled. “I’m not leaving you at my back.”

Dream sighed. “Techno, you can go in front of him. I’ll stay back and stab him if he tries anything.”

“Look, Dream, I appreciate the offer, but knowing that you’re like five seconds away from droppin’ your weapon does not fill me with confidence.”

Dream looked down at his hands. Indeed, they were shaking, fingers spasming unevenly around the axe handle. “Ah,” he muttered. “I might have pushed myself too hard.”

(All it had taken was two months of exile for his body to deteriorate so much. Was this how Tommy felt after--?)

“W-we could just walk in a row?”

All four men startled violently, whipping around. “Where did you come from?!” Technoblade demanded, his axe out and pointed straight at Ranboo. The enderman hybrid yelped and rapidly backpedaled, his tail fluffing out in alarm.

“I’ve been here the entire time!” he cried. “On the sidelines! I swear I didn’t want to be here please don’t kill me--”

“It’s okay,” Dream said tiredly. He pushed Technoblade’s axe down. “He’s not going to hurt us. Good suggestion, by the way-- we can just walk in a row. Nobody has to be behind anyone else.”

“Are you all coming?” Tubbo called from the treeline.

Quackity and Technoblade engaged in an intense staredown. Dream glanced at Fundy and Ranboo.

“Do you want to just go?” he asked.

Fundy snorted and headed off towards Tubbo, Ranboo trailing after him. Dream brought up the rear, leaving Technoblade and Quackity at the back of the group.

Tubbo was waiting for them in a snowy clearing, arms crossed over his bloody apron. “Alright,” he said once they had arranged themselves, both factions split on either side of the clearing. The determined glint in his eyes made something in Dream’s chest ache. “Tell me. What happened during exile?”

Dream took a fortifying breath, reviewing the story he and Tommy had constructed. He’d have to pull some of his own experience from Loop Zero into the lie. *Tommy wanted this*, he reminded himself. *He wanted to be the villain this loop, so don’t hold back.*

With that in mind, he set his shoulders and started talking.

103. remix, pt. 6

“No. No. Absolutely the fuck not.”

“Quackity--”

“You really expect me to believe that?” Quackity swept a hand in Dream’s direction. “Have you forgotten how many fucking times this bastard has lied to us? You really think *Tommy* would do that?”

“It-- you didn’t see how he was acting,” Tubbo whispered. “You didn’t talk to him on the beach. He was-- he was different.”

“He was-- *is* your *best friend*,” Quackity snapped. Couldn’t anyone see how irrational they were being? Trusting *Dream’s* words about Tommy, who he’d clearly had a vendetta against since the day the teenager joined the server? “You’ve known him for *years*, Tubbo--”

“People change,” Fundy murmured. “Like Wilbur did.”

Quackity let out a derisive laugh. “Fine. Fucking fine. So you’re all just gonna take *Dream’s* word for it, huh?”

“Tommy has his mask--”

“--he could given it to him to build his story--”

“--he’s injured--”

“--could be faking--”

“--the exile site--”

“--he probably burnt it down to frame Tommy before he ran--”

“--the court document--”

“--he could have planted it!” Quackity’s hands curled and uncurled, itching for his axe. “At least *talk* to Tommy before you believe Dream! Why the fuck are you trusting him?!”

“It’s in Tommy’s handwriting,” Fundy supplied. When Quackity rounded on him, he raised his hands. “The enchantment on the picture, I mean. I recognized it. It’s in Tommy’s handwriting.”

“Which Dream could have *forged*.”

“But it makes sense--”

“So? He could still be lying.” Quackity raked his hands through his hair. “Look, just-- you can’t just instantly believe whatever shit Dream says, okay? You know this. We know this.”

Tubbo remained silent.

“Listen,” Quackity sighed. “Taking Dream’s mask as leverage, making him burn his stuff, threatening George and Sapnap-- does that really sound like something *Tommy* would do? Seriously, in what universe would he become a manipulative fucker like-- like-- Dream? Did you forget what Dream did? He tried to make you exile Tommy for *minor property damage*, Tubbo. He’s a fucking psychopath, and he *hates Tommy*. You can’t trust anything he says.”

“You don’t have to believe me,” Dream said. “Quackity’s right, I could be lying.”

Quackity leveled a glare at him. What manipulative bullshit was the man trying to pull now?

“W-we, um.” Ranboo shrunk back as attention turned towards him. “We sh-should probably talk to Tommy? Um, a-ask him what happened?”

Tubbo breathed out, shoulders drooping. “No, he’s right. You’re right. Tommy wouldn’t do this.”

Thank fuck, Tubbo was finally seeing reason. “Exactly!”

“But we could talk to him,” Fundy added. He winced when Quackity turned a withering stare on him. “Just in case! You know, g-get his take on things--”

“Sounds great,” Technoblade interrupted. “Now if you’re all done. . .”

The *audacity* of this bastard. Quackity bristled. “Now wait one fucking second--”

“I told you everything,” Dream said. “I held up my end of the deal.”

“You did,” Tubbo agreed. “We’ll leave you alone.”

Quackity hesitated, glancing between Tubbo and Technoblade. “This isn’t over,” he snarled.

Technoblade straightened, eyes glinting. “Oh?”

The tension in the clearing skyrocketed. Tubbo sighed, grabbed Quackity’s arm and *pulled*. Quackity yelped, breaking eye contact with Technoblade and whipping around. “Tubbo--”

“Quackity,” Tubbo said. “Please.”

Quackity stared at the child president, taking in the weary slope of his shoulders and the exhaustion on his face. The kid had been through an emotional rollercoaster in the last hour - he was in no shape to fight. Dream had supposedly held up his end of the deal (though Quackity was pretty sure the story he’d fed them was complete bullshit); it would be pointless to stay here. They could afford to hold off on Butcher Army activities until they talked to Tommy.

“Fine,” he muttered. Tubbo visibly relaxed at his acquiescence.

Tossing one last glare at Dream and Technoblade, Quackity turned on his heel and stalked into the forest. Tubbo stumbled along beside him, and after a moment of hesitation, Fundy and Ranboo followed.

Quackity hoped they weren't making a huge mistake.

“So,” Technoblade said. “Are we gonna talk about that?”

“No.”

Technoblade sighed. “Dream.”

“Technoblade,” Dream mimicked. He turned away. “Let’s go, it’s getting cold out here.”

He couldn’t see Technoblade, but he could hear his footsteps crunching in the snow behind him. “Did Tommy really blackmail you?”

“I wouldn’t say *blackmail*.”

“He threatened to kill your friends if you didn’t play along.”

“They’re not my friends.”

Technoblade huffed. “But it worked.”

Dream shrugged, the movement stiff and uncomfortable. “Yeah, well, I didn’t want them to get hurt.”

There was a long moment of silence. Dream kept his gaze fixed on the house in the distance, steps quickening.

Technoblade matched his pace, coming up on his left. “So how much of that story was true?”

Dream side-eyed him. “Why do you want to know?”

“Curiosity, mostly.” Technoblade shrugged. “I worked with Tommy in Pogtopia. He was kinda weak. Didn’t seem the type to uh, use leverage.”

“People change.”

“Huh,” Technoblade grunted. “. . . are you okay?”

“Didn’t peg you to be an emotional type.”

“I’m not. Social interactions are like, my one weakness, you know this. Now stop tryin’ to change the subject.”

Dream snorted. “I’m fine. I got away.”

“And you’re not worried he’ll go after them?”

“Sapnap and George can take care of themselves,” Dream muttered. “I was too worked up to see it at the time, and I fell for it. I’m not going to make that mistake again.”

They had reached the house now. Dream sent Technoblade a sidelong glance as the piglin hybrid yanked the door open, trying to gauge his expression.

“Good,” the other said gruffly. He entered the house and made a beeline for the ladder, descending into the basement. Dream stared after him, bewildered.

Even after five hundred loops, he still couldn’t understand Technoblade sometimes.

TW: Implied/Referenced Abuse

Tubbo took a deep breath. He donned his presidential mask, forcing his shoulders to straighten as he strode forward. Quackity sent him a sidelong glance but didn't comment.

The L'Mantree soon came into view, and with it, a very familiar figure.

"Tommy!"

Tommy turned around. The smiley mask had been pushed to one side of his head, revealing his bright grin. "Tubbo! Big man, how are you?"

Tubbo felt himself relax. Tommy was acting more like he used to, before the whole Dream debacle. Maybe he'd just been having an off day, with Dream's disappearance and everything. "I'm. . . things have been okay."

"Great, great. And big Q!" Tommy beamed at Quackity. "Haven't seen you in a while!"

He held out his hand. Quackity clasped it in a handshake, grinning back. "Good to see you too, Tommy. How's the freedom?"

Tommy blinked. "Huh?"

"From office," Quackity clarified. He mock-shuddered. "Fuck, if I'd known there was gonna be that much paperwork. . ."

Tommy cackled. "Power and responsibility, big Q. Power and responsibility." He took a step back, crossing his arms. "So you guys said you knew something about Dream?"

The mood plummeted. Quackity and Tubbo glanced at each other, before Quackity reluctantly stepped back. Tubbo took the lead.

"Yeah, uh. . . I ran into him this morning--"

And then Tommy was *right in front of him*, eyes burning with something dark and excited, an unsettling smile carved across his face. "You found him?!"

Tubbo jerked backwards, his heart pounding in his ears. An unreadable expression flashed across Tommy's face before his countenance rearranged itself into an easy grin. "Sorry," he said. "You said you found him?"

"More like he found me," Tubbo answered. He took a few discreet breaths, willing his heart to slow. He wasn't scared. This was *Tommy*, for Prime's sake. "He, uh. . . said some things."

Tommy snorted. "What, did he monologue about his evil plans for world domination or something?"

"No, uh. . ." Tubbo bit the inside of his cheek. There wasn't really a way to tiptoe around this, so. . . "He said you blackmailed him into exiling himself."

Tommy blinked. "Huh?"

The confusion was a good sign. Tubbo's fingers loosened from their tight grip behind his back. "He said you, uh, threatened to hurt George and Sapnap if he didn't give up. That you blackmailed him."

Tommy hesitated. "Well. . . I wouldn't call it *blackmail*."

Tubbo's budding hope withered and died. ". . . What?"

Tommy shrugged. "I didn't blackmail him. I just nudged him in the right direction, yeah?"

Quackity had gone still beside him. Tubbo very deliberately kept his gaze fixed on Tommy. "So you wrote the message on the. . . picture?"

"We talked before the trial about some stuff. I was just making sure he didn't forget it." Tommy's mouth thinned into a neutral line, and the look in his eyes was so *cold* that Tubbo felt a chill go down his spine. "Is that gonna be a problem, Tubbo?"

"I. . . it's, um, it's not. . ."

"What did you talk about?" Quackity cut in, his voice flat. "George and Sapnap?"

If anything, Tommy's gaze grew even colder. "Look, big Q, I came here because you said you had intel on Dream-- not so you could interrogate me."

"Dream said--"

"I don't care what Dream said. Whatever shit he's feeding you, don't believe it." Something cracked at the edge of Tommy's smile. "He's just looking for *attention*."

Tubbo frowned. The words felt familiar. He'd heard them before, but not from Tommy. Not from Quackity either. Who--?

Oh.

(Tommy laughed, shaking Tubbo's hand off his arm. Tubbo narrowed his eyes, grabbing Tommy's hand again. "I saw it," he insisted. "Tommy, you don't need to hide--")

"Not hiding anything," Tommy said. He tried to tug his arm away again, but Tubbo maintained a firm grip. Ignoring Tommy's protests, he reached out and pulled the green bandanna away.

A bracelet of red bruises circled Tommy's wrist. Tubbo traced them with his eyes, pulling up a mental comparison with the one around his own bicep and the one currently decorating Quackity's face.

A handprint.

“... He was just roughhousing,” Tommy said. “He forgets how strong he is.”

Tubbo swallowed bile. “Wilbur’s supposed to be better.”

“Better?”

Better than Schlatt, Tubbo wanted to say. But before he could speak, the door slammed open. Both boys looked up to see Wilbur in the doorway, his eyes fixed on Tommy’s wrist.

“Ah, Tommy!” His gaze flicked up again. Dismissive. Like he hadn’t made a fucking bruise on Tommy’s arm. “Just the man I needed!”

“Wilbur,” Tubbo started, but Wilbur held up a hand.

“Ah-ah,” he tutted. “I need to talk to Tommy. Alone.”

Tubbo could feel his teeth grinding together. “Wilbur, Tommy’s arm-- he said--”

Wilbur snorted. “Don’t listen to what the gremlin says. He’s just looking for attention.”

“Fuck you,” Tommy protested, but there was no heat to it. He sent Tubbo a half-hearted wave. “It’s fine, Tubbo. Go uh, file Schlatt’s tax returns or some shit. I got big man plans to make with Wilbur.”

Tubbo shifted, uncertain, but Wilbur was watching him with mistrustful eyes and Tommy was pleading for him to go--

So he left.

They never brought the incident up again.)

Tubbo stared at Tommy. Tommy raised his chin, the ice in his eyes cracking apart to reveal burning, fiery rage.

Tubbo was going to be sick. “Tommy,” he whispered. “Tommy, did you-- are you--”

“Tubbo!” A distant cry caught their attention. Fundy barreled down the path towards them, skidding to a stop just shy of running into Quackity. “Tubbo,” he panted. “Technoblade’s in L’Manberg!”

Quackity cursed, reaching for his inventory. “Where?”

“Philza! He’s-- he was heading towards Phil’s house, I don’t think he saw me. Dream’s with him--” his gaze landed on Tommy. “--T-Tommy?”

A slow, dangerous smile spread across Tommy’s face. “Dream’s in L’Manberg, huh? With Philza?”

“Don’t,” Tubbo blurted.

Tommy sneered at him before he pulled the mask over his face. With a careless wave and the sound of a shattering enderpearl, he was gone.

129. remix, pt. 8 (*inspired by ProcrastinatingMilk*)

“I already told you, I can get Phil out on my own--”

“Like how you faced the butcher army on your own?”

Technoblade sighed. “You were going to collapse two hours ago--”

“I drank a strength potion and got better.” Dream frowned at him. “We’ve had this conversation, we’re already here, there’s no point in arguing.”

Technoblade muttered something under his breath before falling silent.

They skirted around the houses, finally reaching the edge of the main plaza. Technoblade stopped short at the sight of the anvil hanging high over the cage, something that seemed out of place in the otherwise picturesque nation. “What is that?”

Dream shrugged, catching a flash of orange in the corner of his vision. Weighing the pros and cons, he decided not to say anything. They’d agreed that the only scripted thing about this loop would be his story from Exile, so if Fundy ran off to alert the Butcher Army. . . or Tommy. . . it would make things interesting.

Technoblade hadn’t seen the fox hybrid, too caught up in staring at the platform looming over them. “What *is* this?” he repeated.

“Execution platform,” Dream answered, scenes of golden light flashing through his mind. He’d seen Technoblade’s execution over twenty times by now. “Probably for you.”

Technoblade’s hands tightened into fists. “‘Fair trial’,” he muttered, then whipped around and marched towards Philza’s house. “Let’s get out of here.”

Dream sent one last glance towards where Fundy had been hiding, then followed.

“The catacombs?” Technoblade asked. He took the bundle of items Philza shoved in his direction and began shuffling them into the bags sitting on the floor. “What are those?”

“Mineshafts,” Philza answered, his gaze sweeping across the room. “Beneath my house. We can use them to escape.”

Dream straightened up from where he had been rummaging through a chest, holding aloft a bundle of what appeared to be letters. “Phil, did you want to take this too?”

“I knew I was forgetting something!” Philza swept the papers from Dream’s hands and hurried over to Technoblade. Technoblade took them, brow crinkling.

“Are these--”

“From her, yeah.”

Technoblade handed the letters back. “Keep them in your inventory. They might get damaged in the bags.”

“Who--?” Dream started, only to be cut off by a noise outside.

The muffled sound of an enderpearl shattering set them all on high alert. A moment later, heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs.

Philza was already moving, sweeping the bags out of view before heading towards the door. Technoblade and Dream slipped into the bedroom and shut the door.

Technoblade pried the closet open. “Get in,” he whispered, but Dream shook his head.

“We won't both fit in there. I'll get an invis and hide under the bed--”

A door slammed outside, followed by the crash of breaking glass. Philza’s voice went silent. Technoblade’s head whipped around, but before he could do anything, Dream shoved him into the closet and shut the door. Dream then dove for the bed, wedging himself underneath it while fumbling with his inventory. His fingers closed around a bottle and he yanked it out, struggling to pop the cork with one hand. His elbow whacked against the bedframe. He hissed and the bottle dropped from hand, rolling across the floor and clinking to a stop against the wall below the windowsill.

The bedroom door slammed open. Dream heard Philza make a sound of protest.

“I know you’re in here,” Tommy murmured. Dream watched his boots as they clomped into the room, mentally calculating if he could drink an invisibility potion. Tommy was currently facing away from him, but if he pulled something from his inventory, he’d *definitely* see the flash of light. He just had to lay here and pray he didn’t get caught.

Tommy paused beside the window-- and the discarded invisibility potion laying under it. Then he turned and ambled over to the bed. His boots stopped a mere foot away from Dream's hand. Dream stared at them, holding his breath.

A smiley mask lowered into his range of vision, underscored by a smile full of teeth. “Found you.”

A hand closed around his arm, dragging him out from beneath the bed. Dream summoned his sword and slashed at Tommy, but the teenager grabbed his wrist and *twisted*. Dream cursed as his weapon slipped from his fingers, and Tommy laughed, victorious, right before

Technoblade barreled into him. The piglin hybrid ripped them apart, all but hurling Tommy away. The teenager crashed into the far wall, drawing his sword just in time to block Technoblade's. He ducked and *pushed*, forcing Technoblade back, then lunged for Dream.

Technoblade intercepted him, eyes burning. He knocked Tommy away with a well-timed kick. "Go," he ordered.

"Where?" Dream retorted, glancing back at Tommy, who had staggered to his feet. "He's in the door--"

Technoblade shattered the glass window with one strike of his elbow and shoved Dream out of it. Dream didn't even have time to scream. He hit the ground, rolled wrong, and came up with protesting ribs and a twisted ankle. Stumbling to his feet, he was barely five feet away when Tommy landed where he'd been, sword drawn.

"Come here!" Tommy screamed.

"Fuck no," Dream retorted, pulling out the last weapon in his inventory - a crossbow - and pointed it at Tommy's face. "One more step and I'll shoot."

Tommy opened his mouth to respond, then leapt aside, narrowly dodging Technoblade's attack. The piglin hybrid didn't bat an eye, reversing the downstroke into a swipe that would have taken Tommy's head off if he hadn't ducked. Tommy met Technoblade head on, striking back with a ferocity and skill that seemed to catch his opponent off guard. Now that they were out of close quarters, they were both free to fight at their full capacity. Technoblade was one of the best fighters on the server, yes, but Tommy had over two centuries' worth of experience under his belt. In fact, the only reason he hadn't yet overwhelmed Technoblade was the fact that physical changes didn't transfer across loops.

Dream kept his crossbow aimed at the fight, but he couldn't get a clear shot in. Technoblade caught his eye and jerked his head back towards the house, then turned to parry one of Tommy's swings. "Go get Phil!" he shouted. Dream hesitated for a moment, then turned tail and hobbled towards Philza's house as fast as he could.

The door swung away from the splintered frame with a light touch, revealing the man lying prone on the floor. Dream rushed over, ignoring his protesting ankle, and dropped down next to him. "Philza!"

Philza glared up at him, fury dissolving into relief when he saw Dream. He made a sound as though he was trying to speak, but his jaw remained firmly shut. Dream glanced at his quivering wings.

"You can't move," he realized.

Philza made an affirmative noise.

"Is there any way you can show me where the secret tunnel is?"

Philza hesitated. That in itself was answer enough.

“Fuck. Okay.” Dream glanced towards the door, then back to Philza. “Techno’s fighting Tommy outside-- I’ll grab our stuff and try to carry you out, does that work?”

Another affirmative. Dream grabbed the bags from where they’d been stashed behind some chests, then began the arduous task of transporting Philza.

Trying to sit him up was like trying to move a marble statue. Dream quickly realized that the man’s muscles were quite literally locked in place; trying to pull him up forced the rest of him off the floor. Kind of like a cardboard cutout-- which was very inconvenient. Dream was running on the two Strength potions he’d drunk an hour earlier, his ribs and ankle were aching, and he couldn’t even use a Healing because potion overdose was *not* on his agenda. He could barely move Philza in this state, much less lift him.

“I’ll have to drag you,” he told Philza. Philza, understandably, looked very displeased by this, but they didn’t have a better choice.

And so Dream found himself trying to maneuver Philza down the stairs without breaking anything. The wings made it a bit difficult (*fuck* they were heavy), and Dream winced every time Philza’s feet dropped from one step to the next (better his feet than his head, but *still*). He breathed a sigh of relief as they reached the ground, pausing to catch his breath. Dream could almost hear Tommy making jokes about Philza’s age in the back of his head.

Speaking of Tommy--

Dream took a moment to survey the fight. Technoblade appeared to be on the offensive, though every time he tried to pull away, Tommy would be right on him. Techno was gaining ground, however, driving Tommy back.

No, wait. Tommy was *letting* himself get driven back. Back, towards the execution platform.

“Technoblade!”

Technoblade’s head whipped around. When he spotted Dream and Philza, he redoubled his efforts to beat Tommy down. Tommy fell back under the renewed onslaught, backing up until he and Technoblade were fighting on the steps of the platform.

“He’s trying to get you to the cage!” Dream shouted. Technoblade immediately tried to disengage, but Tommy grabbed his arm and spun him around onto the platform, raising a glass bottle above his head.

Dream’s blood turned to ice. “Above!” he screamed, but the warning came too late. A cloud of gray smoke engulfed Technoblade, and almost instantly, his movements stilled.

“Paralysis,” Tommy huffed, panting with the exertion of the fight. Despite this, his voice carried across the plaza. “A bit like upgraded slowness. I’m pretty proud of it.”

Dream hesitated, glancing down at Philza. Should he make a run for it? If he did though, Technoblade would be at L’Manberg’s mercy. And Prime knew they didn’t have a lot of it.

The decision was taken out of his hands when Tommy straightened, ambling over to Technoblade. He wrenched the blade from Technoblade's frozen fingers and tapped the flat of it against his shoulder. "Now, Dream-- come here or Techno dies." He tilted his head. "This is what you like, right? Using leverage?"

Dream didn't move, his heart in his throat. "You-- can't," he protested. "That's not. . ."

Tommy slid the sword an inch closer to Technoblade's neck.

Carefully, Dream lowered Philza to the ground and raised his hands. He approached the platform as steadily as he could, ignoring the throbbing in his ankle. Technoblade glowered as he approached, likely wondering what the *fuck* he was doing.

To be honest, Dream had no idea. They hadn't planned to get this many people involved, and things were spiraling out of control. Tommy hadn't shown any sign of hesitation, though, and if he wanted to drop the idea, he'd say something. Dream trusted his judgment. If Tommy was going to continue, he'd follow his lead.

So he took a deep breath and shuffled up the steps, stopping in front of Tommy. "You got me. Now step away from Techno."

Tommy paused, as though considering something. ". . . Drop your stuff."

Dream went still. "That's. . . some of it isn't mine," he protested. "You can't burn Philza's--"

"Drop your stuff," Tommy repeated. He adjusted his grip on the sword. Dream glanced at it, then began laying his items on the ground - starting with Philza's bags. When his inventory was empty, he began stripping his armor off. The last thing to land in the pile was the heavy cloak Technoblade had given him, especially suited for the arctic temperatures they lived in. He felt cold without it.

"That's everything," he said quietly.

Tommy jerked his head towards the cage. "Get in."

Dream stepped in. The gate slammed shut. Tommy lowered the sword from Technoblade's throat. "See? That wasn't so hard, huh?"

Dream remained silent, his eyes darting towards Philza. The avian hybrid was still lying on the ground of the plaza, but had managed to bring up a crossbow with one shaking hand.

Tommy followed his gaze and clicked his tongue. He laid a hand on the lever. "Act up, and he gets crushed," he called.

Philza had regained enough control over his facial muscles to assume a mimicry of a scowl. He lowered the weapon.

Tommy glanced back at Dream and tilted his head. Dream nodded back, just slight enough that it could be passed off as a dip of the chin. He had three lives, losing one wasn't going to matter much in the grand scheme of things.

Tommy relaxed slightly, leaning almost *casually* against the lever. “So, Dream. Why’d you run away?”

Before Dream could answer, a voice rang across the plaza. “Tommy, what are you doing?”

“Tubbo!” Tommy turned around, one arm sweeping out in a welcome. His other one remained firmly on the lever. “Quackity, Fundy-- you’re just in time!”

“For what?” Tubbo demanded. “What are you doing?”

Tommy shrugged, cocking his head towards the anvil looming above them. “You set this up for Techno and Dream, yeah? I caught ‘em for you.”

Tubbo grimaced. “We weren’t going to use it.”

“Why not?” Tommy tapped his fingers on the lever and Technoblade growled, low and furious, in the back of his throat. “I mean, we have Dream right where we want him, ey? I’m just asking him a few questions.”

“And then what?”

“Well, that depends on him.” Tommy jerked his chin towards Dream. “He can choose to return to exile, or he can be stubborn.”

Tubbo stared at him. “. . . You promised you wouldn’t be the next Wilbur.”

“Tubbo, what the fuck are you talking about? I’m not Wilbur. I’m not Schlatt. I’m not even Dream, Tubbo, don’t you see? Don’t you get it?” Tommy smiled, wide and bright. “I’m me. Just Tommy. Nobody’s pulling my strings anymore, and fuck, it’s *amazing*.”

Quackity shifted, eyes darting to the cage. “Tommy, man, this isn’t you.”

Tommy laughed. “Oh c’mon big Q, you know why I’m doing this.” He swept an arm out towards Dream. “He started this. I’m just giving him a taste of his own medicine, yeah?”

“Yeah, I get that, but. . .” Quackity’s hands flexed around his axe. “Would you have done it? Would you really have hurt Sapnap and George?”

Tommy shrugged. “I don’t make empty threats.”

Quackity reeled back like he’d been struck. Tommy ignored him, turning back to Dream.

“So why’d you run?” He pressed. “And to *Technoblade*, of all people.”

Dream narrowed his eyes. “I’m not going back with you. I’m done with your games.”

Tommy laughed. It wasn’t a pleasant sound. “A few weeks with Technoblade,” he mused, “and you’re already forgetting what you are.”

Ah, so they were taking this into *delicate* territory. Dream curled his fingers in the hem of his shirt and said nothing.

“You need a reminder,” Tommy mused. His conversational tone sent chills down Dream’s spine - because he recognized it. Because he himself had used it many times before, when he’d been threatening Tommy.

Tommy hummed, turning to the pile of discarded items. Nudging a foot beneath the cloak, he kicked it to the side. “A reminder,” he repeated.

Flint and steel sparked in his hands. The cloak went up in flames. Dream lunged forward, injured ribs screaming as he slammed into the bars. “NO--!”

He watched numbly as the pale blue cloth blackened and disintegrated. Hours of painstaking work, gone just like that. This must have been how Tommy felt, whenever Dream made him destroy his own items. How many times had Dream dug that hole? How many times had he ordered Tommy to empty his inventory?

Dream wanted to throw up. He didn’t. Instead, he watched as the flames devoured the last scrap of blue cloth, leaving nothing but ash.

When the platform began to catch fire as well, Tommy dumped a water bucket on the mess and stamped out the remaining flames. The end result was a large patch of soot, marring the otherwise pristine stage. Dream stared at it, his fingers white around the cloth of his shirt.

“Huh,” Tommy said mildly. But when he turned to him, Dream saw the same horror and self-loathing reflected in his eyes. It was a testament to his acting skill that neither appeared in his voice. “So, what should I burn next?”

“Stop,” someone said.

Tommy’s trembling hands curled into fists as he turned to Fundy, who only stood up straighter.

“Stop,” the fox hybrid repeated. He took a step forward, closer to the platform. “Tommy, what the *fuck* are you doing?”

“Teaching him a lesson,” Tommy said. Dream curled in on himself, wincing as he recalled all the times he’d used the same excuse. “You have a problem with that, Fundy?”

“Um, *yes?! What part of--*” Fundy gestured at the smoking remains of the cloak, “--*that counts as teaching!?*”

Tommy scoffed. “You all were going to kill him anyway. I’m just making sure the message sticks.”

Fundy shook his head. “Tommy, this isn’t-- this is straight-out *torture*, man. You’re playing with him. That’s not-- it’s not--”

“Good? *Right?*” Fundy took a step back at the vitriol dripping from Tommy’s words. “Don’t be stupid, Fundy. Dream brought this on himself. He deserves this.”

“That’s--”

“Did you forget Manberg?” Tommy demanded. “Did you forget *Schlatt*? Did you forget who was giving him power? Did you forget *him*--” he jabbed a finger in Dream’s direction, “--laughing while *this nation* went up in flames?!” He turned on Dream. “And *you!* You were the one who gave Wilbur his TNT!”

Dream swallowed, something uncomfortable roiling in his chest as he recalled the mentioned events. Tommy must have noticed, because his previous ire melted into forced calm. He sighed.

“You’re not going to give up, are you?”

Dream remained stubbornly silent.

“Fine. If you’re so insistent on being a problem, I’ll treat you like one.” Tommy smiled, and for a second he let a bit of genuine friendliness leak into his voice. “Catch you later, green boy.”

He pulled the lever.

The last thing Dream heard was the wet *crunch* of metal against bone.

135. remix, pt. 9 (inspired by Pooptato1341)

When Tommy pulled the lever, several things happened at once.

First, Dream disappeared under 200 pounds of steel, his death signaled by a puff of smoke.

Second, someone from the side of the plaza - they sounded a bit like Fundy, but Tommy wasn’t sure - shouted in alarm.

Third, Tommy jerked back as an arrow imbedded itself into the wood above the lever, mere *inches* from his face. He turned to see Philza raising his crossbow for another shot, most of the paralysis having worn off. A quick scan showed that the Butcher Army (minus Ranboo) was now approaching the platform, and Technoblade had begun moving (albeit very, very slowly). It was four against one, five if he counted Techno - not good odds.

Time to leave, then.

He whipped out one of his few remaining enderpearls and tossed it. The last thing he heard was Tubbo’s cry for him to wait.

Tommy all but fell down the stairs of his base, tumbling inside and slamming the door shut. He sunk down against the wall, fingers digging into his scalp as though the action could prevent him from shaking apart.

Puffy's reminders rung in his mind. In for four, hold for seven, exhale for eight. Repeat. Compartmentalize. Break it down into small bits. He could do this.

Okay. Start from the beginning. How did this begin? What was his goal? He'd started with the intention of understanding Dream's motivations a bit more, yeah, but he hadn't prepared for it. Hadn't expected how *deep* it would get.

As he'd watched Dream's items go up in flames, a vindictive warmth had curled behind his ribs. It was the kind of exhilaration he'd gotten during the first Final Confrontation, when he'd stood over his abuser and ripped his power from his hands. But now it wasn't a matter of retribution - it was just beating down someone who'd already been fucked over.

But it still felt *good*. A tiny part of him glowed with vindictive pleasure, hissing about how Dream was getting a taste of his own medicine. It was disgusting. He hated it. He hated it, and yet--

Tommy dug his nails deeper into his skin. Something wet and warm dripped across his fingertips. He focused on the pain, because it was better than thinking about how he was *spiraling*. Spiraling, like how Dream had spiraled - *don't think about it*.

He breathed through clenched teeth and tried to think about something else. Air hissed between his teeth.

In for four, hold for seven, exhale for eight. Repeat.

His communicator vibrated against his hip. Tommy jerked, scrambling to his feet before he realized that there was no threat. He yanked the comm up and stared at the screen, half-terrified of what he'd see.

Private Messaging: Dream

<Dream>: *respwaned ok*

<Dream>: *did you get out*

<Dream>: *are u ol*

<Dream>: **ok?*

Private Messaging: Tubbo

<Tubbo_>: *tommy, where are you?*

<Tubbo_>: *can we talk?*

Without thinking, Tommy threw his communicator across the room. It hit the far wall and clattered to the floor.

“Fuck fuck fuck,” he hissed, scrambling over and scooping it up. A quick scan revealed no damage. He stood there for a moment, just *breathing*, then looked down at the screen again.

Tubbo’s messages were swept aside. He could deal with those later. Right now, he needed to think.

This loop was spinning out of control. The lines between acting and *genuine emotion* were blurring. It would be dangerous to let things continue, and if Tommy said something right here, right now, Dream would drop it. Then they could fake their deaths and try their hand at another cottagecore arc.

The thing was, Dream hadn’t said anything yet. If Tommy had crossed a line, he would have spoken up. Instead, Dream had *gone* with Tommy’s plan, even when both of them strayed into dangerous territory. He’d thrown away a *life* for the act.

And. . . Tommy wasn’t breaking any of the rules. He hadn’t killed any of the non-loopers, and even if he was causing them ‘extreme emotional distress’ or whatever fancy bullshit it was called, anything that happened this loop would disappear in the next. There were no consequences save for the mental effects it would have on the loopers - and Dream was fine, so Tommy had to be fine too. Besides, this wasn’t the final decision. If shit *really* hit the fan, they could easily back out.

Tommy took a deep breath and made up his mind.

Private Messaging: Dream

<TommyInnit>: *all good, pearled awy before they could attack*

<TommyInnit>: *whatr ur plans for the rest ofthis loop?*

<TommyInnit>: *bc I got a couple ideas*

154. remix, pt. 10

It had been nearly two hours since Quackity had told them everything, and Sapnap was still in denial.

Last he'd checked, Tommy was a good kid. Traumatized, angry, and a little misguided, but at the end of the day he was just a teenager who'd been through too much shit.

Hearing that he'd-- *fuck*, that he'd threatened George and Sapnap to get Dream to cooperate, that he'd messed with Dream's head in Exile, that he'd killed-- no, *executed* him, because there was a difference--

He'd known that this server took good things and twisted them beyond recognition. But some part of him had never thought that it would happen to *Tommy*. Tommy, the sunshine child who'd remained determined in the face of Dream's rage, who'd sacrificed *so much* for the ones he loved. Oh, Sapnap was *furious* that Tommy had burned down George's house - because no matter whatever the fuck had gone down at that sham of a trial, Sapnap believed George - and *doubly* as furious that Tommy had pinned it on Dream, but at the end of the day, he knew that Tommy was just a kid who took pranks a little too far. Dream had played along, even, and Sapnap had laughed with George because they'd thought this was another bit, another moment when Dream humored Tommy's games.

Except it hadn't been a game. And this? This went against everything he knew about Tommy. Tommy was supposed to be a constant, a teenager that would never grow into shoes too big for him. Except Tommy *had* grown into those shoes, then outgrown them, and was now teetering on the edge of the same chasm Wilbur had fallen into.

Looking back now, that belief had been stupid. Tommy had been involved in almost every major conflict, had suffered at the hands of nearly everyone on the server. He was bound to snap at some point. Sapnap just hadn't thought that he'd break like *this*.

A weight settled against his side. "You okay?" Karl asked, his voice laced with concern. Sapnap let out a dry laugh.

"No," he admitted. "It's just. . . *Tommy*. He wouldn't-- he wouldn't *do that*, would he?"

"I don't know," Karl admitted. "But Quackity wouldn't lie to us. You saw how torn up he was."

Grim silence settled over them. Sapnap slumped, rubbing a hand over his eyes. "Shit," he muttered. "*Shit*. He was close to Tommy, right? I shouldn't--"

"None of that." Karl pulled his hand away from his face and rubbed circles across the back of his palm. "Just because you weren't as close doesn't mean you're not allowed to feel upset. He *threatened* you and George to get at Dream, Sap. That's not okay."

"I *know* that," Sapnap whispered. "But-- *Tommy*. And *Dream*-- fuck, *Dream*, we thought it was a bit, we thought he was just going along with Tommy. We haven't been too close recently but he's still-- he lost a *life*, Karl. I need to-- I don't know where he is. Tommy killed him, Karl-- *Tommy*. How could he do that? *Why* would he do that? It's Tommy, he's not supposed to be-- to be. . ."

Karl was silent for a moment. "He's not," he agreed at last, then sighed heavily and tugged at Sapnap's shoulders. "C'mere. You need a hug."

“This isn’t a hug,” Sapnap muttered, but he let himself flop across Karl’s legs. Karl hummed, amused, and began running his fingers through his hair. They sat in quiet peace for a while, simply enjoying each others’ presence.

At last, Sapnap reluctantly peeled himself away and sat up. “. . . Where’s Q? I know he said he wanted to be alone, but it’s been over two hours.”

“Still in his room.” Karl brushed his hair out of his face so he could squint at Sapnap. “You want to check on him?”

In answer, Sapnap began pushing himself off the couch. Karl rushed to help him, only to nearly crack his head open on the coffee table when his legs refused to cooperate. Sapnap winced. “Your legs fell asleep?”

“Yup,” Karl confirmed. He held out his hands in a silent plea for assistance, which Sapnap gladly gave. Together, they hobbled towards the stairs. Karl giggled as they nearly tripped on the first step, and Sapnap found himself smiling.

Still, even as his heart grew lighter, he couldn’t help but remember the bright grin Tommy had sent him on the first day on the server. His boisterous laughter, and his childish delight in juvenile pranks. How could Tommy - *Tommy*, the endearing nuisance that grew on people like a fungus - use him as a bargaining chip? And then there was Dream, the friend that had grown into a stranger - the friend Sapnap had drifted away from, even as he grew closer to George - if anything, *Dream* was the one who'd been set to become the villain of Tommy's story.

A tiny part of his mind murmured that things weren’t so black and white anymore.

Technoblade nearly tore the door off its hinges in his haste to get inside. His heart pounded in his ears, almost loud enough to drown out the clamor in his head. Philza was a step behind him, wings fluffed up with agitation. “Dream?” he called. “Dream, are you here?”

A thump reverberated through the ceiling. Muffled cursing floated down from above, and Technoblade felt a part of him relax. He wasted no time throwing himself up the ladder, scrambling through the door and into the guest bedroom.

“Dream?”

Dream was sprawled on the ground, presumably due to a fall. He’d managed to prop himself up against the bed and was in the process of rearranging himself into a seated position. At the sound of Technoblade’s voice, he froze, then slowly looked up like a child that had been caught with their hand in the cookie jar.

Technoblade heard Philza hiss behind him, feathers rustling against cloth as he recoiled. New scars spiderwebbed across Dream's face like cracks in an eggshell, ugly, jagged things radiating from a point in his hairline. They continued down his neck and into the collar of his shirt, and Technoblade would bet a good portion of his wealth that the rest of his body was in a similar state.

He looked like a piece of broken pottery, shattered and haphazardly glued back together.

"Hi?" Dream said, and Technoblade startled when he realized that the silence had dragged on for a moment too long. Giving himself a mental shake, he swept forward, already drawing a potion of Regeneration from his inventory.

"Does it hurt?" he asked. Dream hesitated, flexing his hands, then shook his head and waved the potion away.

"I'm fine," he said. Technoblade let out a displeased rumble, but he set the potion aside in favor of helping Dream back into the bed. "No, really-- the respawn fixed most of it."

"Not all of it," Technoblade muttered. Once Dream was properly settled against the headboard, he snatched the potion back up and shook it in front of Dream's face. "Drink."

Dream rolled his eyes, but took the potion and downed it like a shot. Then he shuddered at the sudden magic overload. Technoblade snatched the empty bottle from his hands before he could drop it.

"Slowly," he chided. Dream made a face at him, like the mature adult he was. Technoblade snorted and turned away to stow the bottle in a chest.

"So," Philza said. "Tommy."

"Tommy," Technoblade grunted. He dragged a chair from the corner of the room and settled into it. "He's a problem. Big one. Better fighter than I remember - didn't even notice he was baitin' me."

"Invented new potions too," Philza muttered. "Never seen paralysis before." Which, given Philza's lifespan, was quite a concern.

Dream hummed, twisting his fingers in his blankets. "He's dangerous, but I don't think killing him will solve anything? Like," he added hastily when Technoblade's eyes narrowed, "It'll just get Tubbo and the rest of L'Manberg mad at us. Tommy's the vice president, you know?"

". . . Then what if we destroy L'Manberg?" Philza asked, and Technoblade straightened because he *knew* that tone, *knew* the barely-hidden rage straining beneath it. This was personal. This was something beyond Dream, and Technoblade *understood* because Philza *hated* L'Manberg for taking Wilbur away from him, for trying to take Technoblade as well.

"That. . ." Dream chewed on the inside of his cheek. "Won't it just end with all of L'Manberg fighting us?"

"Look Dream, we're gonna be fighting L'Manberg either way. If you're worried about losing, I think the three of us can take them. Not to brag or anythin', but we're kinda the best fighters on the server."

"Not right now, I'm not."

Technoblade paused, studied Dream for a moment, and was forced to concede that that was a fair point. "Well then, Phil and I are the best fighters on the server. We can take 'em, and I've been stockpilin' some--"

"Techno," Philza interrupted, and there was such *panic* in his voice that Technoblade threw himself to his feet, spinning to face him. But Philza wasn't looking at him-- he was looking at the window. Technoblade followed his gaze, and his heart dropped into his stomach.

The area around the house was *ringed* with TNT, the walls similarly plastered with explosives. At the center of it all stood Tommy, Dream's mask set firmly over his face. He stared directly at Technoblade even as he struck a flint and steel over the first fuse, then waved mockingly before vanishing in a burst of ender particles. Technoblade snarled, grabbing Philza and Dream and *lunging* for the window, but it was too late.

The TNT detonated, and the world went up in flames.

164. *remix, pt. 11*

Philza clawed his way through the murky darkness, hands scraping at broken shingles and soot. Smoke filled his nose and he hacked, mouth opening in a soundless scream as he struggled towards the open air. A moment later he broke through the surface, gasping, and with what remained of his strength, dragged himself out of the rubble and into the snow.

He lay there for a moment, staring blankly up at the ash-stained sky. He could hear the fires crackling merrily away at the remains of the house. The cold seeped through the back of his thin cloak - he hadn't had a chance to change into clothes suitable for the arctic yet, not with how frantic their escape from L'Manberg had been. Technoblade had been insistent--

OH FUCK, TECHNOBLADE!

Philza catapulted into a seated position, ignoring the tingling protest of newly-healed bones. "TECHNO!" he shouted. "TECHNO, CAN YOU HEAR ME?!"

"Right here," a voice grunted behind him, and Philza whipped around to see Technoblade trudging towards him. "You okay?"

In answer, Philza held up a spent totem. Technoblade grimaced and held up his own in return. "Glad you had it. If you died. . ."

What would have followed went unsaid. Philza accepted Technoblade's hand, letting the piglin hybrid yank him to his feet. "Did. . . did Dream have a totem?"

Technoblade's expression was answer enough.

Philza's heart sank into his stomach. ". . . Shit. That's-- what, two lives in a day? His-- his spawn was set here, right--?"

"Doesn't matter. The bed's gone."

"So he--"

"Yup." Technoblade jerked his head to the north. "He's back at Spawn."

"Fuck."

"Won't have weapons or armor," Technoblade continued. His voice was oddly flat, detached as though he was observing the scene from a distance. "We should take inventory of what we have, salvage what we can, then head for Spawn. Prime knows he'll probably need help."

Philza could only watch as Technoblade rolled up his sleeves and marched into the wreckage, snuffing the smaller fires beneath his boots. About five feet in, he stopped and nudged something with his foot.

"Well, all my pets are dead," he called. Through the smoke, Philza saw him bend down and pluck an enderpearl - presumably Edward's - from the rubble. "Chests are gone, potions too. Basement's buried, and we don't have time to excavate. Everything we own's in our inventories now. Good thing we didn't have time to unpack."

Philza carefully didn't look over towards where half the house had collapsed on top of the stables. "Yeah, that's. . . lucky. Techno, mate, do you want to. . . get back here? Ground might not be stable where you're standing."

For several long seconds, Technoblade remained silent. His back was to Philza, shoulders hiked up to his ears and one hand curled around Edward's pearl. At last, he sighed, audible even over the crackling flames.

"Just. . . give me a minute," he said. He didn't turn around.

Philza retreated to a respectful distance and busied himself with sorting through his inventory, taking mental notes of what they had and what they needed. Both he and Techno presumably had enough to last them *and* Dream four days - ample time to set up a new base. Problem was, they needed to find a new place to build; this location was obviously compromised.

Unfortunately, although the Totem of Undying had healed the lingering effects of his scuffle with Tommy, it didn't fix the physical exhaustion weighing him down. He'd had worse - but if their retrieval mission turned into a fight, things could get messy.

The sound of crunching snow signaled Technoblade's approach. Philza looked up, meeting his gaze. A familiar *rage* burned in the warrior's eyes, rekindled by the smoldering remains of his home. Philza recognized that rage, knew it was reflected in his own eyes. Bloodthirst. *Revenge*.

He didn't comment on it. "Ready?"

"Yeah." Technoblade adjusted his cloak. His fingers left ashy prints in the cloth. "Before we get Dream, though, we gotta make one more stop. I'm thinkin' we might need some wither skulls. . ."

Dream groaned as he was dragged back into the land of the living. Everything *ached*. His newest scars smarted against the fabric of his hoodie. He wanted nothing more than to lie there in the grass and sleep the day away, but that hope was crushed by the snap of a twig.

Dream reluctantly peeled his eyes open. "Hi Tommy."

"Dream," Tommy said. He leaned over him, the sun forming a halo of gold around his head. "How're you feeling?"

"Absolutely wonderful," Dream deadpanned. "Respawning after being blown to bits is *so* refreshing. We should do this more often."

Tommy snorted. "Can you walk?"

"Yesn't."

Tommy crouched down and slung Dream across his back in a firefighter's lift. He carefully rose to his feet, paused for a moment to adjust to the extra weight, then turned and plodded deeper into the forest.

"Where are we going?"

"Your base. Or, well, *my* base now."

Dream side-eyed him. "You didn't redecorate it, did you?"

"Of course I did. Your taste in aesthetic is *shit*."

"Your taste in aesthetic is literally just cobblestone--"

"Oh fuck you, I have *nuance* and *sophistication* --"

"--'nuance and sophistication' my left sock--"

--mimimi my name is Dream and I think neon green hoodies are fashionable--”

Hidden behind a tree ten feet away, Fundy clutched his bristling tail and watched as Tommy and Dream disappeared into the foliage.

174. remix, pt. 12

“What do you mean he’s *gone*?”

Both Quackity and Fundy tensed, but Tubbo remained unmoved in the face of Technoblade’s anger. “I told you. Tommy was here. He took him.”

Technoblade *growled*. “You’re tellin’ me that your vice president blew up my house, grabbed Dream, and waltzed away from Spawn while you just *watched*?”

Fundy bristled beneath Technoblade’s glare, his ears pressed flat to his head. “Yes, but I’m telling you--”

“You’re tellin’ me that they let Tommy *take him*.” The grass crunched beneath Technoblade’s boots as he took a step forward. “Doesn’t matter if they were actin’ *friendly* or *not*.”

“Something’s *wrong*,” Fundy insisted. “Dream didn’t-- Dream didn’t sound scared at all! He didn’t fight when Tommy grabbed him--”

“Dream was crushed to death,” Philza pointed out. “That usually means minor paralysis for a few minutes after respawn.”

--but then why were they acting so-- *nice* to each other? Tommy *killed* Dream! Dream was terrified of Tommy! They’re *enemies*, but they-- they acted like they were *friends*.”

Philza snorted. Fundy flinched back at the acerbic noise. “What, you think they were working together? Mate, even if they orchestrated this entire mess-- *why would they*?”

Fundy stared at his grandfather, unable to answer. Because really, *why* would Dream and Tommy pretend to be archnemeses, cook up an elaborate storyline, and drag both the Antarctic commune and the L’Manberg Cabinet into it? As it stood, Tommy would be losing his friends, his position, his *nation* - things he clearly treasured, because Fundy had seen him *die* for them. On top of that, Dream had been in terrible shape when he’d tried to fight the Butcher Army. Yes, injuries could be faked - but malnutrition *couldn’t*. Would the two of them really go so far for a plot that accomplished nothing?

“Manipulation,” Tubbo said.

Heads turned towards Tubbo, who kept his gaze firmly on the ground. “What?” Philza said.

“Manipulation,” Tubbo repeated. “Gaslighting. It’s-- some abus-- ab-- some *people* force other people to be dependent on them for a-- for a long time. A-and when that happens, the-- the *victims* might begin thinking they’re friends.”

“Dream doesn’t think he’s friends with Tommy,” Technoblade pointed out.

“He *told* you he doesn’t think he’s friends with Tommy,” Tubbo corrected. “How he actually feels might be a different story, and. . . and when he’s *with* Tommy--”

“He met Tommy in L’Manberg. He had no trouble fighting him.”

“He had a weapon in L’Manberg and both you and Phil at his back. He was paralyzed and alone when he respawned.” Tubbo curled his fingers in the hem of his shirt. “He couldn’t do anything to stop Tommy, so he-- so he fell back into that. . . mindset.”

“Or he was just playing along,” Philza muttered. “To keep Tommy from hurting him.”

“This is ridiculous,” Quackity interrupted, unable to contain his incredulity. “Look, I know Tommy’s changed, but he wouldn’t-- he isn’t like that!”

“I don’t want to believe it,” Tubbo whispered, “but how else would you explain what Fundy saw? How else would you explain what happened on the execution platform?”

Quackity opened his mouth. Closed it. His shoulders slumped. “*Fuck.*”

“No, no,” Fundy snapped. “You don’t get it-- Dream wasn’t scared *at all*. They acted like *brothers*, not like-- I don’t know, a manipulative relationship--”

“Tommy and Wilbur acted like brothers too.”

Silence descended upon the Spawn clearing. Philza had gone bone-white. “Wh-what?” he stammered, taking a step back. “You. . . what do you mean, *too*?”

“Wh-when Tommy and Wilbur were exiled, Wilbur. . . he-- he kinda went bad in the head.” Tubbo stared at his shoes. “He, uh, he’d hurt Tommy. Sometimes. Th-there were bruises. And, uh, Tommy told me he’d have these moments when he was convinced Tommy was traitor, and then it’d get *really* bad then ‘cause Tommy would get locked up in this tiny room and Wil told him it was for his own good and I didn’t do anything because *I didn’t know*--”

“Woah woah woah--” Quackity stepped in, pressing his hands down on Tubbo’s shoulders. “Tubbo. Tubbo, look at me. See me? Can you breathe with me?”

Tubbo staggered back, knocking Quackity’s arms away. “I didn’t *know*,” he choked out. “I thought Tommy was okay but he was *hurting* but he didn’t tell me until Wilbur was *dead*--”

“Wilbur didn’t hurt Tommy,” Technoblade interrupted. “I was *there*, Tubbo. I would have noticed.”

But Tubbo was already shaking his head. “You weren’t looking hard enough,” he whispered. “He was good at faking.”

Technoblade’s eyes narrowed. He rifled through his memories, recalling the sound of Tommy’s boisterous shouts echoing off the walls of Pogtopia, his bright smile--

--the way he'd lean into Wilbur when the man placed a possessive hand on his shoulder, the bruises on his arms and face that Technoblade thought had come from the walls of the ravine, how thin and *pale* he looked when he *wasn't* shouting or smiling--

"He wouldn't," Philza said. "Wilbur *wouldn't do that.*"

Tubbo hunched in on himself. "I thought Tommy wouldn't either."

"I know Wilbur! I'm his *father!*"

"And I'm Tommy's *best friend*. Or I was." Tubbo giggled, humorless and just a touch hysterical. "Dunno if he feels the same anymore."

Philza turned to Technoblade, wings flaring with desperate hope, and Technoblade wished more than anything that he could confirm Phil's beliefs. But Tubbo's words had thrown his memories in a whole new light, and in retrospect, Technoblade should have caught on to what was happening.

Self blame later, he told himself, meeting Phil's gaze. Whatever his friend saw in his eyes was answer enough.

"N-no," the avian stammered, recoiling. "He-- he *wouldn't--*"

"I'm sorry, Phil," Technoblade said. "I failed him."

Philza seemed to go impossibly *paler*. His hands flexed around empty air, as though he was trying to grasp something that wasn't there. His damaged wings curled around him in a futile attempt to shield himself from the truth. Fundy, too, had folded in on himself, wide-eyed and trembling beneath the weight of the new revelations. Quackity was still doing his best to ground him and Tubbo, but even he appeared shaken.

"Wh-what then?" he asked roughly. "What the *fuck* do we do?"

"Gettin' Dream away from Tommy sounds like a good startin' point," Technoblade deadpanned. The fury burning hot in his chest had been tempered by the guilt of failing Tommy in Pogtopia, but it hadn't been extinguished. "Maybe takin' Tommy down while we're at it--"

"We're *not* killing him!"

The occupants of the clearing flinched in surprise, turning to Fundy. The fox hybrid bristled, refusing to back down even under the combined weight of their stares.

"Look, even if Dream was-- was manipulated into this or something, it's-- killing Tommy isn't going to fix anything. He needs help."

"Assumin' he *can* be helped," Technoblade muttered. He raised a hand to forestall any protest. "I know, I wasn't talkin' about killing him anyway. But-- look, Phil and I are goin' in for Dream, and Dream only. We're not gonna go after Tommy, but if he gets in our way, that's his problem."

Tubbo shifted, visibly collecting himself. Technoblade felt a grudging respect as he watched the President facade fall back into place - the calm, collected leader who didn't bend under pressure.

"That's. . . reasonable. Truce?" he asked, holding out one hand. Technoblade clasped it in a grudging handshake.

"Truce," the piglin hybrid agreed. "Just until we get Dream back."

Tubbo released a shaky breath and let go. "Okay. Okay," he muttered, clasping his hands behind his back. "First things first, we have to track him down." His voice cracked on the fifth syllable, but he powered through. "Find where he took Dream, get him out, and. . . and detain Tommy."

Neither Fundy nor Quackity protested this decision. Tubbo turned to Technoblade, something *resigned* in the set of his shoulders. "Leave Tommy to us. Just don't-- don't hurt him."

"I make no promises," Technoblade rumbled. He stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled, a single, piercing note that split the air. The L'Manbergians startled as two wolves slunk from the shadows, their pale fur gleaming in the sunlight.

Technoblade knelt in front of the hounds, withdrawing a netherite pauldron from his inventory. He held it out to the animals, waiting patiently as they sniffed it. The first wolf barked and backed away. The second wolf trotted to the edge of the clearing, nosing the foliage. Both paced several times before slipping into the bushes. Technoblade strode after them, only to stop about a foot from the clearing's edge and glance back at the others.

"Well? The hounds say they went this way. You comin' or not?"

180. remix, pt. 13

TW: Referenced Abuse, Minor Suicidal Ideation

Sapnap sprinted through the forest, following the trail of crushed flora the party ahead of him had left behind. He'd been mining when he got Quackity's message about going off to confront Tommy, and by the time he'd gotten to Spawn, they were already gone.

So here he was, trying to catch up with them. He could only thank the heavens for the years spent chasing after Dream; he'd have run out of stamina long ago if it wasn't for the manhunts.

Hazy shadows became visible through the trees. "*Wait!*" he shouted. Several of the figures stopped short and whipped around to face him, weapons materializing in their hands. He skidded to a stop, panting with exertion, and raised his hands to show that he was unarmed.

"Sapnap," Quackity greeted, lowering his axe. The others warily followed his example. "You made it."

“You really -- think I was-- going to stay-- out of this?” Sapnap bit out between gasps for air, glowering at him. “He’s my friend.”

“We’re wastin’ time,” a monotone voice cut in. Sapnap’s gaze snapped up to meet Technoblade’s. The piglin hybrid nodded towards the two hounds nosing their way through the foliage, already a good five yards or so ahead. “The hounds’re goin’ to leave us behind. Can you keep up?”

Sapnap straightened and forced his breathing to even out. He squared his shoulders in silent challenge. “I can. Lead the way, Technoblade.”

“Welcome to my humble abode!”

Tommy tried not to feel *too* smug at the stunned look on Dream’s face as he hobbled out of the stairwell. “Holy shit,” the man breathed. “This place is *huge*.”

“Took me weeks,” Tommy admitted. “Worth it, though.” He’d had *fun* building this base, loathe as he was to admit it. He was really quite proud of everything he’d done with it.

Dream turned in a slow circle, wincing as several of his newly-healed muscles protested the movement. By the look on his face, he did not share Tommy’s opinion. “Mm. I do have to ask - how has your taste gotten *worse* across the loops?”

“Excuse you, my builds are beautiful--”

“It looks like you just decided to slap cobblestone in random-- is that a *throne*?”

“--gotta keep up my evil tyrant look, Dream, you know how it is--”

“That is the *ugliest* throne I’ve ever seen--”

“At least I have *creativity*! Your idea for an evil base was literally just blackstone! Not a *single* chair anywhere--”

“--I didn’t need chairs, because unlike you I don’t have *weak-ass legs*.”

Tommy punched him in the arm. Dream cackled.

“Wow, Tommy. Resorting to physical violence because you can’t come up with a better argument?”

Tommy took a step towards him. “Oh I’ll *show* you physical violence, you--”

Their banter was cut off when the hum of the portal stationed at the other end of the room abruptly rose in pitch. A dark silhouette wavered into existence, soon resolving itself into the

form of a familiar piglin hybrid.

“Oh,” said Tommy. “Well, fuck.”

“This is it,” Technoblade said. He hefted his sword and threw a glance at the rest of them. “Ready?”

A round of murmured assents answered his question. Technoblade gave a sharp jerk of his head, then turned on his heel and disappeared into the portal. Philza followed a moment later, his void-black wings pinned back with apprehension.

Sapnap was next. He hesitated just before entering the frame, taking a moment to steel himself. Then, with a deep breath, he plunged into the light.

When the violet cleared, he found himself in a large, vault-like structure. Soul torches lined the marble walls, their azure fire casting the room with cold light. A raised platform sat at the other end of the room, bracketed by braziers and topped with a garish cobblestone throne. Tommy and Dream stood at the foot of the throne, both staring at the assembled rescue party with surprise. Tommy’s hand was poised in the air. Dream was half-crouched, his arms raised as though to ward off a blow.

Sapnap saw red. “*Get away from him,*” he snarled, sounding more animal than human. The others were already moving in, forming a blockade and herding Dream away from Tommy.

“How--” Tommy began, then zeroed in on the hounds pacing around Technoblade’s feet. “Oh. Huh.”

“Tommy,” Tubbo said. “This ends now.”

Sapnap took his eyes off of Tommy for a moment to check on Dream. He seemed unharmed, save for the silvery scars that crossed his face like cracks in pottery. Philza and Technoblade hovered nearby, one asking questions in quiet, intent undertones while the other settled protectively in front of him.

Dream met Sapnap’s gaze over Technoblade’s shoulder. His eyes widened with something resembling surprise before he schooled his expression into one of neutrality. Sapnap recalled that the last time they’d seen each other was when Tommy led him out of the courtroom. Sapnap hadn’t stopped them. If he’d *known*--

He jerked his gaze away and adjusted his grip on his axe, fixing his glare on the true threat in the room. It was too late for regrets. The only thing he could do now was to make sure Tommy *never* got to Dream again.

Tommy gritted his teeth and slid Dream's mask over his face, thankful beyond measure that it hid his expression. He'd let his guard down, let his act drop as he *finally* got some alone time with Dream. The others weren't supposed to find them yet. His base was supposed to be *safe*.

One moment, he'd been joking around with Dream. The next, the others had barged in with their weapons drawn, separating the two of them and backing him into a corner. He *should* act like the villain he'd been playing this loop, but the sudden turn of events had left him shaken and scrambling to pull on his facade.

"You've-- you've gone too far," Tubbo was saying. "I know you're angry, but it doesn't-- you don't have to keep doing this. Just-- come with us peacefully, and we can talk it out."

Tommy forced a noise of incredulity through his teeth. "*I've* gone too far?" He demanded. "So it's fine that Dream destroys my home and *kills* me *twice*, but I kill him *once* and suddenly *I'm* the bad guy?"

"That's not what this is about," Sapnap growled.

"Oh *yeah*? Then tell me what it's *about*, because from where I'm standing you're all--"

"*Tommy*," Tubbo interrupted before the argument could escalate. "Please. Stand down. You've done enough."

"And *what* exactly have I done?"

"You framed Dream. You blackmailed him, threatened *innocents* to force him to cooperate. You blew up Technoblade's house, nearly killed him *and* Philza, who only has *one life*-- "

"It's for L'Manberg, Tubbo! Don't you get it? Those bastards destroyed us! Dream gave Wilbur that TNT, helped tear our nation down - Technoblade set fuckin' withers on us! They needed to pay for what they did--"

"How long has it been since you spent a night in L'Manberg?"

Tommy blinked, caught off guard. "What the fuck does that have to do with anything?"

"Tommy," Tubbo said, and the word was heavy with such disappointment that Tommy felt like he'd been struck in the face. "The Anarchists were happy to leave us alone. We had a ceasefire. Dream was out of the way, exiled. He could have stayed there. You didn't-- you didn't need to-- blow up Techno's house, or-- or *hurt* Dream like that. You love L'Manberg, I know you do-- but you haven't-- you never considered the consequences. You're not doing this for L'Manberg. You're doing this for yourself."

Tommy grasped for a retort and came up with nothing. He felt like his chest had been filled with ice. His heart pounded in his ears, and he realized with sudden clarity that this wasn't a game anymore. This was real. The anguish in Tubbo's voice, the hatred in Sapnap's glare, the *fear* written into the set of Fundy's mouth - it was real.

He looked, really *looked*, at Dream. Even after several weeks with Technoblade, the waxy pallor of his skin and the gauntness of his features had barely faded. He'd thought Dream would stop if they went too far - but with everything that happened across the loops, their definitions of *acceptable boundaries* had become skewed. Did he really expect the man who'd been willing to *starve himself* for an *act* to realize what was and wasn't okay?

The self-loathing curled behind his ribs dug in its claws and *gouged*. This loop had changed him, and not for the better. He'd hurt his friends but justified it with the thought that they wouldn't remember what happened - exactly the pitfall he and Dream had been trying to avoid since the loops *started*.

Shit. *Shit*. They'd messed up *big time*.

Finger by finger, Tommy released his grip on his axe. It clattered to the floor. Tubbo stared at him, eyes wide, but all Tommy could see was the grief weighing down his shoulders. Grief that had been Tommy's fault. Grief that was all because of a stupid idea taken too far.

With a shuddering breath, he sunk to his knees. "That's it," he croaked. Tears welled in his eyes. "That's it. I'm done. We're done. I can't do this anymore."

The silence following his declaration was broken by a commotion in the back of the crowd. Tommy looked up to see Dream fighting his way to the front, shrugging off the hands that tried to pull him back. He crossed the distance between them in three strides and dragged Tommy into a hug, ignoring the cries of alarm from their audience.

"Fuck, Dream," Tommy whispered. He pressed his masked face into Dream's shoulder and brought his shaking arms up to return the hug. "I fucked up. I fucked up so bad."

Dream closed his eyes. "We both did."

Sapnap marched forward, axe ready and eyes colder than ice. "Tommy, step away from him."

(*"Dream, step away from them."*)

The sheer *irony* of the parallels to loop zero wasn't lost on either looper. Dream broke out of the hug and burst into *howling* laughter, doubling over and nearly dragging Tommy down with him. Tommy staggered under the unexpected weight, but he was too busy biting down his own semi-deranged chortling to do much more than try to hold Dream up. Sapnap stopped in his tracks, his bewildered gaze darting between the two of them.

"Dream," another voice growled. Tommy raised his head to see Technoblade stepping up to Sapnap's side, face dark. "Get away from him."

"No," Dream managed to choke out between hysterical giggles.

Technoblade's brow furrowed. "Dream, you're not thinking clearly. Tommy's been messin' with your head--"

Tommy's strangled snickering devolved into full-on cackling. "*Fuck*," he gasped between bouts of laughter, pushing his mask aside to wipe frantically at the tears dripping down his chin. "Fucking fuck we fucked this up *so bad--*"

Dream's own laughter was dying down now, dissolving into quiet weeping. This was apparently too much for Sapnap, who reached out and tried to physically pry Dream away from Tommy.

"*No!*" Dream snapped, so acidic that Sapnap physically recoiled. He tightened his grip on Tommy, pulling him into another hug. Tommy curled into it, blocking out the rest of the world. He couldn't look at his former friends. He couldn't face what he'd done.

"Dream--" Sapnap said.

"You don't understand," Dream said. His voice was breathy, pitched high with long-restrained emotion. He backed away, pulling Tommy with him. "He didn't-- he didn't hurt me. This is just a misunderstanding."

"Dream." And *oh*, the genuine concern in Philza's voice felt like a punch to the gut. "Please, mate. Let us help you."

"I don't *need* help! This wasn't-- it wasn't *real!*"

"Is that what he made you think?"

Tommy stiffened at the prickling *rage* curled in Technoblade's voice. In the next moment, he found himself pinned to the ground, the point of Technoblade's sword hovering mere inches from his eye. Dream was kicking at Sapnap and Philza, trying to twist himself free as they wrestled him away. "No! Stop! *Stop it!* It wasn't real! I WAS LYING, DAMN IT! *LET HIM GO!*"

Tommy felt the fight drain out of him. He went limp, barely twitching even when the blade grazed his cheek. This was it. This was his worst nightmare come to fruition. If Technoblade didn't kill him now, he'd be locked up, stripped of his freedom and left to rot. Either way, he'd never see Dream again in this loop - the others wouldn't let them anywhere *near* each other, not even if he became a ghost.

Technoblade was still glaring at him, all hot fury and cold calculation. "What did you do to him?" he asked, only to whip his sword up at the last moment to deflect a blow. "... All you L'Manbergians ever do is betray me, huh?"

"Don't hurt him," Tubbo said, voice wavering but eyes sharp.

"I'm not goin' to *kill* him. I just want to ask some questions."

"Don't hurt him," Tubbo repeated. Quackity and Fundy flanked him, forming a circle around Technoblade and Tommy. "You can ask him questions once we've made sure he won't run."

I don't trust you not to kill him, went unsaid. Technoblade surveyed his opponents, then grudgingly got off of Tommy and hauled him up. Tubbo slid a pair of handcuffs around his

wrists, and then Tommy found himself being hustled into a makeshift obsidian cell. He began giggling at the sheer *irony* of it all, only to cut himself off when Fundy flinched.

Fuck. This was *so fucked up*. He didn't want to do this. He *couldn't* do this. His eyes darted towards the iron bars, and for a moment, he considered pitching forward and-- but no, that wouldn't fix anything. The others would still be upset, and Dream would still be stuck, and--

A familiar itch sparked in his stomach. Tommy's knees went weak with relief. He staggered sideways, leaning heavily against the obsidian with a whisper of "*thank fuck.*" On the other side of the room, Dream went still. Technoblade, sensing that something was wrong, turned back towards Tommy with a demand for information-- but he was too late.

The abyss yawned beneath them, gold-mottled strings wrapping around their souls and pulling them *back*. It was the beginning of a new loop, a restart that wiped all their mistakes from existence.

Tommy closed his eyes and welcomed it with open arms.

Chapter End Notes

[Alternative end](#) written by tigergrace!

[Another alternative end](#) by A_Random_Shadow!

seeing red

Chapter Summary

The Eggpire! Tommy loop, wherein the Egg takes over Tommy's body instead of his mind.

194. *seeing red, pt. 1*

TW: Minor Body Horror

They had grown too complacent.

Tommy shivered and curled in on himself, trying to minimize the amount of contact he was making with the walls of the box. The space was so small, he couldn't uncurl from a fetal position without banging his elbows against the obsidian. The only thing keeping him from spiraling into a full-on panic-attack was cold logic. If he panicked, he'd play right into the Crimson's hands. He had to keep calm. Keep a level head. He just had to get through this loop without letting the Crimson infect him. Easy enough; he was immune. The Egg couldn't do shit to him if he couldn't hear it.

Would be easier if Dream could bail him out, but the Eggpire had taken his communicator. He couldn't call for help. Dream wouldn't come looking for him - he'd *told* him he was planning something big, *told* him not to worry if he disappeared for a couple days. So of *course* his shitty luck decided to act up now, because the universe fucking *hated* Tommy.

His right ankle itched. He scratched at it as pins and needles crawled up his skin, inducing him to shift uncomfortably. When the scratching didn't help much, he began rubbing instead in an attempt to regain circulation.

Unfortunately, the sensation didn't dissipate. If anything, it got *worse*, prickling until it bordered on a fiery stinging. He soon found himself gnawing on the inside of his cheek to distract himself from the pain. He couldn't uncurl. He didn't *want* to uncurl. In this position, he was safe. He could close his eyes and pretend he wasn't trapped in a tiny obsidian box.

Beneath his fingers, his leg moved. *Without his permission.*

Tommy jerked, scrambling back on three limbs as the fourth uncurled and knocked lazily against the obsidian wall. The hem of his pants rode up with the movement, exposing his skin. The veins in his ankle were glowing, filled with a bright, unnatural red. *Crimson.*

Oh fuck. It was under his skin. *It was under his skin and puppeting his body.*

Some part of Tommy was aware that he was screaming. The rest of him was focusing on the pins-and-needles climbing up his *left leg*. Spreading across his torso, then his shoulders. But his mind was still his own; he heard no whispers, no taunting-- just his own screams echoing against the walls. The Crimson didn't need to brainwash him with twisted promises if it could make him dance against his will. *Like a puppet on a string--*

"NO!" Tommy shrieked. Hot tears burned their way down his cheeks. He'd never felt so powerless, not even when he'd been trapped in Pandora's Vault. "NO! HELP ME! HELP! DREAM, PLEASE! *DREAM!*"

He knew Dream couldn't hear him, but all rationality was lost in the face of all-consuming fear. So he screamed. He screamed until his voice broke. He screamed until he'd lost control of his arms. He screamed until the obsidian wall cracked open and he was standing, lurching forward into the open where the Eggpire waited for him--

"Nononono," Tommy sobbed as he shuffled towards Bad. "Not like this, *no--* "

"Shhh," the Crimson crooned with Bad's voice. To his horror, Tommy found his throat tightening. He tried to scream again, but his jaw snapped shut. Blood filled his mouth as his teeth sank into his tongue.

"*Shhh,*" the Crimson repeated. "*Stop fighting it. This is good for you, Tommy. We wouldn't need to do this if you'd just **listen.***"

Oh Prime. Oh Prime nononono *no*.

Tears left trails down his cheeks, tinted red with blood and Crimson residue. He wanted to close his eyes and hide until this was over. He wanted to disappear. But the splintered *agony* spidering through his bones grounded him against his will, chaining him to the present. His eyelids wouldn't so much as twitch, no matter how hard he tried to squeeze them shut. The Crimson refused to let him escape, either in body or in mind.

Once, he'd viewed crying as a weakness. Now, it was the only thing he could do.

210. *seeing red, pt. 2*

TW: Graphic depictions of violence, body horror. This loop series is going to be pure Angst with a Happy Ending. If you're just looking for crack, there is none to be found here.

Dream checked his communicator one last time before turning it off, comparing the coordinates Tommy had sent him with the ones on the corner of the screen. It was odd that Tommy had asked to meet him near the entrance to the Egg room, but it wouldn't be the first time he'd pulled something involving the Egg without telling him. Hopefully, he hadn't kickstarted another apocalypse - though Dream was pretty sure he'd already know if that were the case.

A quiet footsteps rang out behind him. He grinned, turning to greet Tommy - and felt the world drop out from under his feet.

Tommy was *red*. Red veins. Red clothes. Red flowers curling through his hair. Only his eyes remained blue, but they were so bloodshot and clouded with terror that they were hardly recognizable. Tears dripped steadily down his chin, tinted crimson.

“T-Tommy?” Dream choked out, caught between horror and revulsion. “What. . . how. . .”

Tommy continued to stare at him. His tears splashed into the grass with a steady *drip-drip-drip*. His jaw twitched minutely, but he otherwise made no move to reply.

Dream swallowed, reaching for his inventory. He *knew* Tommy was immune to the Egg, so how had it managed to infect him? Why were his eyes still blue, and why was he crying? He was clearly in distress, and yet he remained silent.

“Tommy?” he prompted again. “How did you. . . get infected? Why are you here?”

At last, Tommy’s jaw creaked open. The sound that burst forth was something inhuman, a mix between a wail of agony and a garbled attempt at speech. Dream watched with horrified fascination as Tommy repeatedly tried to speak, only to seemingly choke on his own words and fall silent. Finally, he turned towards the tunnel that led to the Egg and beckoned for Dream to follow.

Ah. So this was an attempt to infect him as well.

“Can’t go with you,” Dream said. “Sorry.”

Tommy’s movements shuddered to a halt. He pivoted to face Dream. His face remained eerily blank even as he tilted his head in question.

“I, uh, have other plans,” Dream lied. “I thought you just wanted to talk real quick. I can come back later, when I have more time. . .?”

Tommy studied him for a moment. And then he drew a netherite axe and lurched forward.

Dream rapidly backpedaled, pulling out a shield and sword. He was completely caught off guard by how Tommy moved - fast, unpredictable, his movements jerky and uncoordinated. He lacked the usual experienced grace he fought with, but the strength behind his blows had nearly doubled. He moved as though his body was not his own - like a puppet, limbs not at his own command--

Dream’s eyes caught on the pulsating *red* in Tommy’s veins, and everything clicked into place.

Oh. Oh *Prime*.

“Tommy,” he gasped, arms shaking as he caught a blow on his shield and shunted it off to the side. “Tommy, can you hear me? You’re-- you’re not in control of your body right now, are you?”

Relief flooded Tommy's eyes, followed by a fresh wave of tears. His face twisted, straining against the blankness the Crimson forced upon him. A muffled sound squeezed between his teeth, nearly lost in the *crack-thud-crack* of netherite against wood.

Abruptly, the red staining Tommy's jaw *shifted*. Tommy's mouth flew open with a gasp, and he took in gasps of air like a drowning man. "Fuck-- *fuck*--" he choked out, even as he brought his axe down upon Dream's shield again. "Dream, Dream I can't-- it's *got me*--"

"I know, Tommy, I *know*--"

--you have to get it out, Dream, *please*. Kill me if you have to-- I can't-- help, Dream, *please*--" Tommy lurched forward in an unexpected move, leaving his side wide open. Dream automatically went to take advantage of it, but every instinct he had recoiled violently when he caught Tommy's eye. Possessed or not, he couldn't hurt Tommy-- not like this-- but he had to, Tommy had *asked* him to--

His hesitation cost him. Tommy slid past his guard and sunk his axe into his shoulder.

Dream screamed. It was more out of surprise than pain, but the shock still struck him to the core. Tommy screamed with him, incoherent apologies spilling between gargling cries of denial. The Crimson forced him to *twist* the axe before ripping it free a moment later, effectively rendering Dream's sword arm useless. *Fuck*.

"Nononono, " Tommy sobbed as he lurched forward again. The Crimson vines curled around his arm unfurled and reached towards Dream's open wound. "Dr-Dream, please-- *run*--"

Dream was distantly aware of the curses pouring from his lips as he scrambled back, wracking his mind for a way to fix this mess. He came to the grim conclusion that there was nothing he could do at the moment. With his good arm wrecked and his shield cut down to splinters, there was no way he could fight off, much less *kill*, Tommy. There was also no guarantee that killing Tommy would even free him - they had no precedent for this, nothing to go off of.

Tommy sped up, lifting his axe once again. Dream raised his shield to meet it, grunting as he felt the last of its integrity giving way beneath the attack. "Tommy," he breathed, "I'm going to fix this. Okay? I'll help you. Just give me a bit. I promise."

Hope sparked in Tommy's eyes, a dull ember flaring back to life. Terror bloomed alongside it as he raised his axe again, primed to take out Dream's leg. Without hesitation, Dream flung the remnants of his shield at Tommy's feet, forcing him to jump back. Then he turned and sprinted for the Prime Path, one hand clamped over his bleeding shoulder.

He didn't look back when Tommy's unsettlingly quick footsteps hit the staircase behind him. He didn't look back when Tommy's voice cut off, replaced by the horrid sound Dream now identified as the Crimson attempting to speak through a throat it did not have full control of. He didn't look back at Tommy, because if he looked back, he wouldn't be able to leave him behind.

So Dream ran. Dream ran for the sanctuary of Church Prime, and he didn't look back.

214. *seeing red, pt. 3*

Dream pulled the makeshift bandage around his shoulder tighter, inhaling as the move sent sharp pain stabbing into his arm. He'd only had half a potion of Healing in his inventory - enough to stop the worst of the bleeding, but not enough to completely close the wound. He needed to stop losing blood— hence resorting to cutting off the hem of his hoodie and using it as a bandage. For once, he was grateful for his fucked-up pain tolerance - he likely wouldn't have been able to get to safety otherwise.

“Dream!”

Dream gritted his teeth and forced himself not to react to the voice. The Crimson had been making on and off attempts to speak through Tommy for the past hour, and with each new attempt, it grew steadily more comprehensible. Fortunately, it was unable to enter the Church. Unfortunately, it had settled for pacing angrily around the building. Even *more* unfortunately, it seemed to have learned to take advantage of his emotional connection to Tommy - and was either unable or unwilling to change the inflection of Tommy's voice from anything other than 'terrified and in pain'.

“Dream! Help me!”

Dream exhaled sharply and let his head fall back against the podium. He'd taken to hiding behind it when the Crimson started tracking his movements from outside, appearing in front of a window every time he approached it. The area behind the podium was the only space without a direct line of sight to the windows or the door. He didn't have to look at Tommy from here.

“Please, Dream!”

“Fuck,” Dream hissed. He couldn't break through the walls - the Crimson would see him and run after him. He couldn't tunnel through the floor - the podium was only small enough to hide him from the Crimson's sight if he stayed curled up into a little ball. And given the abundance of Crimson flora covering the area around Church Prime - flora that was sure to have roots - tunneling away might be worse than just making a run for it.

Not that running was a fantastic idea either. Unlike Regeneration, Healing didn't speed up blood replacement - and Dream had lost quite a bit of blood. Was still losing it, in fact. Any sort of physical activity would likely result in him passing out, which was a Bad Idea.

From outside the church, Not-Tommy made a strangled whimpering noise that Dream had never heard the *real* Tommy make. ***“It hurts— Dream, please, make it stop—”***

Well. At least he knew the Crimson was *terrible* at imitating Tommy, because Tommy would either a) never announce that he was in pain, or b) announce it with enough foul language to make Bad cry. Not that Dream was going to give the Crimson pointers. This situation was already fucked up enough without the Crimson being able to *accurately* pretend to *be* Tommy.

Dream took a deep breath and curled a bit tighter. Alright. He needed a plan. His top priority was fixing Tommy, but to do that, he needed to make it out of this alive and *uninfected*. He already knew he was mentally susceptible to the Crimson - something that could be counteracted by the hazmat suits. However, the Crimson could also *physically* take over someone, like it had done to Tommy.

There had to be a way to protect his body from infection. Not armor or a hazmat suit - armor had chinks, and hazmats could be torn through. And that wasn't even approaching the problem of *how* physical possession worked - was it through skin contact? Inhaled spores?

“It’ll stop hurting me if you come out!”

For *fuck’s s*—

Dream sunk his teeth into his cheek and shut his eyes against the tidal wave of *rage* that roared through him. There was nothing he could do at the moment. Rash action would only get himself incapacitated.

Okay. *Okay*. How could he prevent himself from getting infected and free Tommy from the Crimson? Dunking Tommy in Prime Water wouldn't be enough. The Crimson was *in* him - he'd need to drink several doses of Prime Water *and* wait for his body to absorb it to get the infection out of his system, and the likelihood of Dream being able to keep him still long enough to force the water down his throat was next to none. He could also go the fast route and kill Tommy - or ask someone else to do it. But revival just returned a soul to their previous body - what if Tommy respawned with the Crimson in him? What if his *ghost* was still possessed by the Crimson?

Back to the Prime Water idea, then. Getting Tommy to ingest it was the safest bet - but how? He couldn't get close, not without risking being infected himself, if the Crimson could spread through physical contact. He had to *trick* Tommy into ingesting it— but how?

An idea struck him. Several loops ago, Tommy had blessed a jug of punch, successfully turning it into something analogous with Prime Water. Obviously, the Crimson had an interest in keeping Tommy alive - which meant he had to eat and drink. If Dream could become a priest and somehow bless his food. . .

Not to mention the fact that *if* he became a priest, he'd become functionally untouchable to the Egg. In theory, at least. He'd never tested it out.

“Dream, why are you ignoring me? I— I thought we were friends!” Tommy's voice cracked. ***“I thought you cared about me!”***

Dream couldn't stop the strangled hiss of frustration that slipped through his teeth. He hunched forward and clapped his hands over his ears, trying to drown out Not-Tommy's voice. The movement sent fire streaking up his right arm, accompanied by a splash of white blooming across his vision.

He couldn't go on like this. He had to get out soon, before the Crimson managed to goad him into doing something he'd regret. He couldn't dig his way out, couldn't cut his way out,

couldn't do this himself—

—couldn't do this *himself*.

Well.

Shit.

He was an *idiot*.

Dream fumbled for his communicator, wincing as the metal slipped under the half-dried blood staining his hand. He took a moment to run through his memories of the timeline. This loop had started post-destruction-of-L'Manberg, which meant he and Technoblade were on fairly good terms. Because he'd been carefully undoing the damage his loop-zero self had done, he wasn't in prison, so Technoblade still owed him a favor. . .

He swiped to Technoblade's tab and began typing one-handed. His trembling fingers left bloody streaks across the keys.

Private Messaging: Technoblade

<Dream> *techno*

<Dream> *iim calling ihn the favor*

Task completed, he switched the communicator to silent and fixed his eyes on the screen. It wouldn't do for the Crimson to hear the buzz of a received message and realize what he was doing.

Thankfully, he didn't have to wait long.

Private Messaging: Technoblade

<Technoblade> *what is it?*

<Dream> *have u heard of the eggg*

<Technoblade> *the big red one?*

<Dream> *ys*

<Technoblade> *yes, I have in fact heard of it.*

<Technoblade> *you're typing weird*

<Dream> the egg got tojimmy

<Dream> hes got me trpped in the church

<Dream> hurt. cnt go outzidee itll get me too

<Dream> get me out pplease

<Technoblade> you want to use your favor on me getting you out of the church?

<Dream> yes

<Technoblade> I can do that.

<Technoblade> I'll bring regen too

<Technoblade> ETA 10 minutes.

Tommy's voice sounded from outside, still anguished but now tinged with something distinctly *angry*. ***"Dream! I know you're in there!"***

Now knowing that his way out would be there in a few minutes, Dream felt slightly less terrified at the prospect of facing an infected Tommy. With great effort, he pushed himself to his knees, then shuffle-turned until he was facing the pulpit. He stuck his hand inside the built-in compartment and groped blindly around until he found a groove along the back side. He dug his fingers into it and *yanked*, breathing a huff of relief when it gave.

"Stop hiding like a coward!"

Dream poked around in the new space he'd unsealed until his hand closed around a book. He extracted it from the pulpit with some difficulty and sat back on his heels, then grimaced and hastily wiped some blood that had gotten on the cover away with the sleeve of his ruined hoodie. A quick glance-through of the book revealed that it contained what he'd hoped: a guide to priesthood.

Perfect.

He shoved it into his inventory, then cringed when the bright burst of light sent a wave of dizziness through him. The disorientation twisted into ice-cold nausea as Tommy's voice filled the church again. ***"Why won't you help me? Do you hate me that much?"***

Dream let out a shaking breath and curled in on himself, shoving his head between his knees and letting his arms fall out to the sides. He braced himself, but Tommy's next words still felt like a stab through the ribs.

"Fine then," the Crimson snarled. ***"I hate you too. I hate you for letting this happen to me."***

Not Tommy, Dream told himself. *Not Tommy. Tommy told me to leave. Tommy doesn't hate me anymore.*

The next nine minutes felt like the longest in Dream's life. Not-Tommy kept up the verbal abuse, slipping into personal attacks somewhere around the three-minute-mark. Dream furiously tuned him out, humming the main melody of Cat in an attempt to distract himself. He was almost to the end of his second repetition when Not-Tommy made a startled noise.

“... You?”

“Hey, Tommy,” Technoblade drawled. The last notes of Cat died in Dream's throat as he sagged against the podium, limbs weak with relief. “You're not looking too great.”

Not-Tommy hissed in response. ***“This is none of your business. Leave.”***

“I would, but I heard that you've got an ally of mine trapped in there. I can't just let that slide.”

A low growl from Not-Tommy. Technoblade hummed, a dangerous note threading through the sound.

“You really want to fight?”

There was a momentary pause as the Egg considered its odds. It was nowhere near as skilled a fighter as Technoblade, nor did Technoblade have any qualms about hurting Tommy - unlike Dream. It clearly realized this, because it hissed angrily. ***“I will remember this.”***

“Sure. You leavin' now, or...?”

“You cannot keep him from me forever,” the Crimson snarled. A good twenty seconds of silence followed, finally broken by the gentle *thump-thump-thump* of boots against polished blackstone.

“He's gone,” Technoblade called. Dream slumped, letting out a gust of breath as he finally, *finally* let his guard down. He didn't raise his head as Technoblade rounded the podium, instead staring down at his boots.

“You're not lookin' too good,” Technoblade drawled.

“I'll take that regen if you brought it,” Dream croaked through chattering teeth. He was shaking, the icy numbness of blood loss gnawing at his bones. Technoblade uncorked the potion and handed it over, politely ignoring Dream's fumbling and subsequent cursing as he tried to keep the glass from slipping through his trembling fingers. The looper finally managed to down the potion, then groaned and slumped back against the podium as it took effect.

Technoblade eyed him. “Can you stand? Tommy might be lurkin'—”

“Not Tommy,” Dream gritted out, shuddering at the pins-and-needles sensation of his blood cells multiplying at abnormal rates. Technoblade raised an eyebrow, so he elaborated, “Egg.

Controlling Tommy.”

“... Sure. The *Egg* might be lurkin’ outside, and I’m not too great at fending off feral children while carryin’ someone.”

“I can walk,” Dream muttered. He braced a hand against the podium, took a breath, and began the arduous process of dragging himself to his feet. Thankfully, Technoblade got the hint and hooked a hand under his freshly-healed arm. Together, they managed to get him on his feet. Dream’s vision briefly went white as blood rushed to his head. He staggered into the podium, blinking furiously as he tried not to topple over.

“Don’t pass out on me,” Technoblade deadpanned, shifting his grip so Dream could use him as a crutch. “Like I said. I can’t fend off feral children while carryin’ someone.”

“I’m *trying*,” Dream hissed. He took a deep breath and blinked the remaining spots from his vision. “Okay. Okay, I think I’m good now.”

Technoblade sent him a dubious look but complied, taking a tentative step forward. Dream matched it, shuffling forward in time as he focused on not throwing up all over Technoblade’s fancy boots. The feeling of a Regeneration after blood loss was the absolute *worst*, and it was bringing back very Not Fun memories.

They made it to the gateway of the church with little incident. Dream tensed as they stepped past the threshold, expecting an ambush. Technoblade raised his sword, also on high alert, but no Crimson-infected enemies manifested to attack them. They left the church grounds uninterrupted. It seemed like the Crimson truly was wary of Technoblade.

Dream made a mental note of that even as he began to regain his own strength, leaning less and less on Technoblade as the Regeneration kicked in. The piglin hybrid let him go without comment, though he did raise an eyebrow when Dream abruptly stopped and looked back.

As he thought, there was no sign of Tommy. He wasn’t sure if the churning in his gut was relief or grief.

“You comin’?” Technoblade called. “I can’t stand here all day, Dream. I’m a busy man.”

“... Yeah,” Dream muttered. He took one last look back in the direction of the Egg, then followed.

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“So to summarize,” Technoblade said, “Tommy is possessed by the Egg. The Egg wants to kill or possess everyone. You want to...save Tommy and kill the Egg.”

Dream scratched absently at the blood drying on his palms. “..Yes.”

“And you want me to help you.”

“The Egg’s faction is literally called the Eggpire,” Dream pointed out. “They want to infect the entire server. Isn’t it the Syndicate’s mission to fight tyranny?”

Technoblade’s expression didn’t change, but Dream did notice the sudden stillness in his posture. “...How did you know about the Syndicate?”

Shit. Right. The only people who were supposed to know about the Syndicate was the Syndicate themselves.

“I have my sources.” When Technoblade’s eyes only narrowed, Dream sighed. “Look. You don’t trust me. Fair. I don’t trust you either. But the Egg is a threat to all of us, and if we don’t take care of it now, it’ll just get stronger. It’ll *spread*. You saw what it did to Tommy. It’ll try to do that to us too.”

“So you say,” Technoblade mused. Then he sighed. “Look, Dream. We might be on good terms, but I’m kinda suspicious about how you learned about the Syndicate. You might need my help, but I don’t need yours. That’s what it’s like. So yeah, I’ll help you—on one condition.”

“What is it?”

“Tell me what your ‘sources’ are.”

Dream deliberated with himself for a moment. “...You won’t believe me.”

“Yeah? Sounds like an excuse.”

“Dreams,” Dream said. “I can see the future.”

Technoblade stared at him, expression flat. “Seriously? That’s what you’re goin’ with?”

“I’m studying to become a...prophet of Prime.” Dream maintained eye contact with Technoblade. He kept his face placid and his hands relaxed. “Seeing the future is part of the territory. Your Syndicate plays a major part in some of the futures I’ve seen.”

“Some of,” Technoblade echoed. “Not *the* future?”

“No, I see possibilities. There’s no such thing as a set future.”

“Right. And what are we doing in some of these...futures?”

Dream cracked a smile. “Well, in one, you were breaking me out of prison.”

“...Prison?”

“If I’d made some...bad decisions, I would’ve wound up in prison. So I avoided those.”

“Right,” Technoblade drawled. “And I’m assumin’ you can’t predict what I’m goin’ to eat for breakfast tomorrow?”

“No,” Dream said, “but I can tell you that you have voices in your head. They demand blood and shout ‘E’ a lot.”

Technoblade’s expression went dangerously flat. Dream kept his placid facade in place and waited for him to sort it out in his head.

“You know about the voices,” Technoblade said after an extended pause. “Phil’s the only one who knows. And he doesn’t even know about the ‘E’ thing—stop, Chat, I’m tryin’ to have a serious conversation with Dream here.”

“You complained about them a lot in the future.”

“What made me trust you enough to tell you about them in the future?”

“We were two of the last six standing in the Eggpocalypse.”

“Egg...pocalypse.” Technoblade’s chair creaked as he leaned back into it and let out something close to a disbelieving chuckle. “What, the Egg started the apocalypse?”

“Eggpocalypse,” Dream repeated.

This time, Technoblade really did chuckle—a breathy, humorless “*ha*” that was more sigh than laugh. “So you can see the future. Sure. Not totally sold, but I’m pretty sure you’re good enough at lyin’ to avoid makin’ up something that crazy.” He took a breath, let it out, and looked back up at Dream. “I’ll need to discuss this with the rest of the Syndicate.”

“That’s reasonable.”

“If they’re not on board, I’m not goin’ to try to change their minds.”

That was unfortunate, but Dream would find another way if he had to. “Okay.”

Technoblade huffed. “...You have anywhere to stay in the meantime?”

“I—” *have a house*, was the instinctual response. Dream swallowed it; this wasn’t the time for banter. “...No. Not nearby.”

“Wow, finally admitting that you’re homeless?”

He had a very large, very empty base. He didn’t want to go back to it. “*I have a house*. It’s just...far.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure. You can sleep in one of the guest rooms until I bring it up with the Syndicate. Just the room, though. Don’t touch anything else.”

“Okay.”

Technoblade nodded sharply and rose to his feet. “Follow me,” he said.

The piglin hybrid led Dream up to the next floor, where he pulled open a door at the end of the hall and motioned inside. “This one’s yours,” he said gruffly. “You can sleep here until the others decide if we’re goin’ to help or not. If they don’t—”

“I’ll go,” Dream promised. “I’m not trying to freeload off of you.”

Technoblade offered a sharp nod of acknowledgement and stepped aside to allow Dream entrance. Dream shuffled in, performed the expected cursory glance around the room, then turned back to Technoblade. “...Thanks,” he said. “For, uh, honoring the favor.”

Technoblade shrugged. “What can I say? I’m an honorable guy.” He stepped back. “Get some sleep, Dream. You look like you’re about to fall over.”

The door clicked shut. Dream waited, listening until he heard Technoblade’s footsteps fade away.

And then he promptly fell back on the bed, body trembling with adrenaline. The amount of bullshitting he’d just done left him feeling like he’d outran a herd of angry piglins.

It had been a long time since he and Tommy had had to *convincingly* lie their way out of a situation, and Technoblade was not easily fooled. Luckily, though, lies were often as farfetched as the truth on the SMP. Being able to see the future was pretty much on the same level of believability as things like time travel and revival books. The Eggpocalypse story was fairly plausible, too, even if it had never actually happened. There was still the matter of how he was technically trying to become a *priest*, not a prophet—but hopefully Technoblade was more of a non-practicing follower of Prime and wouldn’t notice the difference.

With a heavy sigh, Dream peeled himself off the comfortable bed. He was fairly familiar with this room, so it was pretty easy to find the loose floorboard in the corner and pry it up. The space beneath was narrow and full of dust bunnies and cobwebs, but with a bit of wiggling, he managed to stuff the book he’d stolen from the Church into it. That was good—he wouldn’t have to worry about losing it if he got killed.

Satisfied, he replaced the floorboard and slithered out from under the desk. From there, it was just a matter of wrangling his aching limbs into cooperating long enough for him to get out of his hoodie. It was definitely beyond repair; he’d have to drop by one of his hideouts in the mainland and get another one soon.

But that was a problem for later-Dream. Current-Dream just tossed the hoodie on the floor, staggered over to the bed, and flopped facedown onto it.

He was asleep in minutes.

Ascension to priesthood wasn't exactly *easy*. There were rituals to be completed, vows to be made, tasks to done, and so on. That being said, the religion of Prime was far from strict. The majority of followers were non-practicing, only displaying their belief through invocations of Prime's name or muttered prayers in times of need. Rather than rituals or rites, emphasis was placed on genuine faith.

Dream, having witnessed firsthand exactly how much the universe liked to screw people over at the *worst possible times*, was a very strong believer in the existence of a sentient higher power. Because seriously, his life was a cosmic joke. And jokes had to have writers, fun existential dread notwithstanding.

So yeah, Dream had a lot of faith. And that meant he had access to shortcuts. A lot of the lengthier rituals could be glossed over in favor of prayers with the caveat that the reciter had strong faith. Dream was thankful for that; he *really* didn't want to have to hunt down fifteen bells, especially given that every village within a ten-mile radius of settled land had likely already been looted to hell and back.

Unfortunately, one of the unavoidable requirements for the rituals meant that they had to occur on holy grounds—which meant that Dream spent a good portion of his days either brewing Potions of Invisibility or using them to sneak through Eggpire-patrolled territory. While running into people was actually pretty rare—he could see them coming from a distance and just take the long way around—it was better to be safe than to be sorry. Dream knew he was a target for the Crimson, and he didn't have the protection of priesthood yet. Until he had it, he'd have to stay under the radar.

On his trips through the mainland, he would catch occasional glimpses of Tommy. His fellow looper was always at a distance and always alone, unlike the other Eggpire members, who seemed to stick in pairs or groups. The reason, though, soon became clear. With each sighting, Tommy appeared more and more... *normal*. The red veins beneath his skin became less prominent, his eyes still bloodshot but only to the degree a poor night of sleep would cause. Soon, it was almost like nothing was wrong with him at all. And without him being constantly spotted with the Eggpire, nobody else on the server had any idea that Tommy was now under the Egg's control. In fact, most people still operated under the assumption that Tommy was *immune*. And given that Tommy hadn't exactly been running around socializing beforehand, his lack of communication wasn't out of the ordinary.

All this came down to one thing: nobody would see Tommy coming. He'd been turned into a sleeper agent for the Crimson.

When Dream figured *that* out, it had taken quite a bit of self-restraint not to start cursing aloud. He couldn't let Tommy get close to the others, not when the Egg might try to infect or murder them. He had to send out a warning—one that the Eggpire wouldn't notice.

Problem was, Dream wasn't exactly seen as a *trustworthy* character in the current timeline. It wasn't anywhere near as bad as Loop Zero, given that he hadn't broken off ties with everyone or tried to use leverage against the rest of the server, but he wasn't well-liked either. Which meant if Dream went around warning people, they'd either brush him off or warn Tommy about what Dream was doing. Neither of those outcomes were good.

So Dream did the only thing he could think of: leaving anonymous notes. This, admittedly, wasn't that much better of a strategy, but it might *at least* get people's guards up.

...Or so Dream hoped. Only time would tell if it worked.

There was a piece of paper nailed to the top of his chest.

Foolish warily tore it off and squinted down at it. "Huh," he muttered. "What *is* this?"

He flipped the paper this way and that, hoping to find some clue that would make the message less cryptic. When that didn't work, he took a quick scan of his surroundings, but found no signs that might point to the identity of the note's writer.

"Huh," Foolish muttered as he looked back down at the note. "Wonder what—"

"—this means."

"We don't know who left it," Sappnap reminded Quackity. "It might just be a joke."

Quackity scowled. "It's a shitty joke. Nobody goes around writing weirdly ominous stuff about Tommy on paper and sticking it to people's doors as a *joke*." His eyes narrowed. "...Something fishy's going on."

"I think it might be a genuine warning," Karl muttered. He ran his finger over the jagged streaks of ink. "Look. It was written—really sloppy. Like whoever wrote it was—"

"—in a rush. Do you recognize this handwriting?"

"No," Eret hummed. Flecks of light scattered across the paper as he tilted it. "But then again—not a lot of people write things by hand around here, so..."

"Hm." Puffy crossed her arms. "...Do you—"

“—think Tommy’s okay?”

Fran barked. Sam sighed and set aside the note so he could press his forehead into her side.

“I don’t even know how they *found* my base,” he muttered into her fur. “This place is supposed to be *hidden*.”

Fran barked again and proceeded to treat Sam to several doggy kisses.

Tubbo stared at the paper tacked to his door.

“Ranboo?” he called. “Did you leave this?”

“Leave what?” Ranboo asked, coming up beside him. He blinked at the note. “Huh... something happened to Tommy? ‘He’s not himself right now’? What does that mean?”

“Dunno.” Though Tubbo’s voice was light, the look on his face was anything but. “...I think he might be in trouble.”

Ranboo warbled nervously. “We saw him last week...”

“Yes,” Tubbo said bluntly. “And he hasn’t answered his comm since then.”

“He said he would be busy for a bit—”

“He *always* answers comm messages, Ranboo. Even if it’s like, a day late.”

Ranboo grimaced. “...So he’s in trouble.”

“Probably!”

“And we should go help him.”

“Exactly what I was thinking!”

“But the note said—”

“Yeah, yeah, stay away, whatever. We don’t know who wrote it, or why they did it. For all we know, someone’s blackmailing him and trying to keep us from finding out, or something. Best way to get answers is to confront him directly.” When Ranboo still hesitated, Tubbo sighed. “C’mon, bossman. You can’t trust *this*—” he waved the note, “—over *Tommy*, can you? If he’s in trouble—”

“No, no, you’re right. We should. I just. Shouldn’t we ask for help? In case something *is* wrong?”

“...I’ll let Jack know where we’re going,” Tubbo decided. “If we disappear, he knows where to look.”

“Do you *think* we’re going to disappear?”

“Only one way to find out, right?”

Dream did his best to appear relaxed even as three pairs of eyes bored into him. They had really pulled out all stops on the intimidation factor—probably to drive home the idea that he wasn’t the one calling the shots here.

“Technoblade told us that you wanted help fighting the Egg,” said Philza. His wings were held stiffly behind him, creating an imposing silhouette in the flickering torchlight. “I think Niki and I would like to hear it from you, though.”

“Okay,” Dream said. “How much do you already know about the Egg?”

“There’s an Eggpire, isn’t there?” Niki asked. “It...I’ve seen the advertisements around the server.”

“Yes. The Egg...it’s sentient. A parasite. It worms its way into people’s heads and makes false promises. And when people believe it—well—that’s how the Eggpire was formed.”

Philza frowned. “So it’s...a cult?”

“A cult with the end goal of world domination, yes. The Eggpire—it wants expansion. It’s always recruiting, always bringing more people in—and if anyone gets in the way of that, they’ll either be killed or...forcibly recruited.” Dream swallowed. “I—Tommy and I found out a little while ago that he was immune to the Egg. He couldn’t hear it. And—well. The Egg didn’t like that. So. It, um, it physically infected him.”

“I thought you said he was immune.”

“Yes, *psychologically* immune. The Egg couldn’t trick him into believing its promises because he couldn’t hear it. So it...did something else. I—I didn’t even realize he was missing, but...when he came back, he...it...it’s controlling his body. He’s still aware of what’s happening. He just can’t fight it.”

“I did see Tommy,” Technoblade chimed in. “Not gonna lie, it was kinda, uh, not the greatest. Pretty terrible, actually.”

Dream eyed the other two members of the Syndicate, trying to assess their reactions. Philza looked troubled, which was to be expected—after L’Manberg’s destruction, he had actually remained quite close to Tommy. Niki, on the other hand, was on slightly more negative terms with Dream’s fellow looper. Her expression—though horrified—was more calculating, like she was weighing the pros and cons of getting involved in this situation.

“I want to save Tommy and destroy the Egg,” Dream stated firmly. He had to lay it out in plain terms, like this was a business transaction. “The Syndicate wants to prevent tyrannies, which is what the Eggpire will turn into if it’s left to run rampant. We share a common interest in fighting the Eggpire.”

“And what exactly is it that you expect the Syndicate to do?” Niki asked, her voice forcibly level.

“To fight off the Eggpire while I get the Crimson out of Tommy. I’m training to become a prophet of Prime, and if I can do that, I’ll be able to use certain rituals to help him.” That was stretching the truth, but Dream didn’t really have time to get into the specifics of *how* the whole ‘save Tommy’ thing would work. “Healing Tommy is a time-sensitive problem—I don’t know if he can infect other people through touch, but when we fought, I think he might’ve tried to infect me by—uh—through, um, through a wound. He’s a danger to everyone on the server—if we let him go on like this, he might be able to infect the entire server.”

Niki inclined her head in acknowledgment. “But *destroying* the Egg?”

“A lot of TNT should do it. I have a lot of that. I just can’t fight the Eggpire off *while* laying TNT.”

“So you need allies.”

“Yes.”

“And you turned to us,” Technoblade spoke up.

“...Yes.” Dream took a deep breath. “Look, I—I know none of you have really—*positive* impressions of me—” he ignored Niki’s quiet snort “—but *please*, this is something that needs to be done. If you all want individual favors from me, or a favor to the Syndicate as a whole, I can exchange that.”

The three members of the Syndicate exchanged looks. Philza was the first to speak. “Hey Dream, would you mind stepping out for a second? I think we should discuss this in private.”

That wasn’t a *no*. Dream nodded and made to stand, only to hesitate at the last moment. “Can I ask one thing? Unrelated to all this, just—”

“Yeah mate, go for it.”

Dream jabbed a thumb at the name carved into the back of his chair. “Is Ranboo...okay?”

“He has personal business to take care of,” Technoblade said, his clipped words a warning that this wasn’t a subject Dream wanted to pursue. Dream nodded in silent acknowledgment and made his way to the door of the Syndicate hideout. He stepped out into the Stronghold hallway, shut the door behind him, and sat down to wait.

It was a long wait. The thick walls and heavy door were essentially soundproof by nature, and so Dream had no idea what direction the conversation was going in. He could only hope that they would agree to help; he couldn’t take down the Egg by himself, and his only true ally at this point in time was Punz. Punz was part of the Eggpire.

An almost indeterminate amount of rumination later, the door creaked open. Dream swiftly got to his feet and strode in. He stopped at the edge of the table and turned back to look at Technoblade as he shut the door.

“We agreed to help,” said Technoblade, “on the condition that you owe the Syndicate a favor.”

Relief crashed down on Dream so suddenly that he had to lock his knees to keep from falling over. “Thank you,” he said as sincerely as he could, mindful to wrangle his voice into something more professional than emotional. “You won’t regret this.”

“That’s what they all say,” Philza muttered, but the glimmer in his eyes let Dream know that he was joking. Niki remained silent. She hid her reservations well, but Dream could tell she wasn’t a hundred percent on board. That was fine. As long as the Egg was destroyed, it wouldn’t matter.

The Syndicate had agreed to help. The server had been warned to stay away from Tommy. The ascension to priesthood was going slow but steadily. The pieces of the plan were slotting into place; now all that was left was to see it through to the end.

Dream took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and looked up at his new allies. *Just hang on, Tommy*, he murmured in the safety of his mind. *We’re coming for you.*

plot-relevant loops

Chapter Summary

Basically just loops relevant to the main plot of this fic (if you can even call it that) sorted in semi-chronological order. Doesn't contain ALL the plot-relevant loops.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to kalkiesoo for giving me the idea!

115. *loop zero*

Sapnap shut the door as slowly as he could, holding his breath as it had clicked shut. When nothing happened to indicate that he'd woken the person sleeping inside, he let himself relax slightly, running a hand through his hair.

“So how is he?”

Sapnap nearly jumped out of his skin. “FUCK!” he yelped, whipping around, only to clap his hands over his mouth. Dream stared back at him, mask pushed to the side of his head. In the dim light, his curiosity was still clear.

Sapnap sighed, uncovering his mouth. “Why the fuck are you awake?”

Dream hummed. “I could ask you the same thing.”

Sapnap sent him a flat look. “Isn't it obvious?”

“Right. So how is he?”

“Asleep,” Sapnap snarked. “I think. I might have woken him up when you scared me.” At Dream's unimpressed stare, he huffed. “He's a bit more coherent now. Calmer. Though he kept muttering something about paths and strings.”

Dream frowned. “. . . Paths and strings?”

“I'm just as lost as you are, man,” Sapnap deadpanned. “Anyway, I got his name before he passed out. It's Karl.”

“With a C or a K?”

“No idea. Not even sure if it’s his real name.” Sapnap sighed. “. . . Do you think we can trust him? You didn’t invite him, but. . .”

“I don’t know,” Dream admitted. “He was-- I think he was actually terrified when we found him. Emotion like that can’t be faked. He didn’t get into the server legally, but I don’t think it was his choice.”

Sapnap sighed. “Who the hell would hack a server just to send someone else in?”

“And why?” Dream shook his head. “Nevermind, we can ask him tomorrow. It’s been a long day. Get some sleep.”

Sapnap grunted and trudged away down the corridor, presumably to pass out in his bed. Dream waited until he was gone, then quietly opened the door.

The stranger (Karl, if that’s what his name really was) lay in the bed, deathly still. Even in the darkness, Dream could see the frown twisted across his face. No thrashing to indicate nightmares, though - he’d really worn himself out panicking earlier.

Dream closed the door, hesitated for a moment, then locked it. Sapnap had found the man in the middle of the woods, and while he hadn’t done anything to harm them, Dream had been burned one too many times to trust a stranger.

Letting out a heavy sigh, he turned on his heel and headed towards the kitchen. He had a feeling he wouldn’t be getting any sleep tonight.

75.

He was in the darkness, surrounded by the void, consumed in the nothingness even as his very being unraveled. He was everything and nothing, everywhere and nowhere at once, galaxies and worlds bursting into existence and crumbling to ashes before his eyes. It *hurt*, hurt like nothing he had ever felt before, and he would have screamed if he could, but the darkness had swallowed his voice, and what little consciousness he had left could not comprehend anything but *everything*. He was in awe. He was in agony. No mortal should have ever laid eyes on the secrets of the universe, the sheer magnitude of it all. He was being torn, pieces chipped away little by little--

And then there was a flash of light, maybe two, and he was being glued back together, gravity pulling tight the strings of his fractured mind. Memories of agony faded into forgotten echoes. The void fled from him, aching nothingness dissipating as he was reassembled, bit by bit, until he was *himself*, him, whole and only a little broken. He marveled at the feeling of stability, of being *solid*.

The universe tugged. He resisted-- he needed more *time*, more time to gather his thoughts, to realize his new state of existence-- but the universe never listened to anyone.

He was catapulted headfirst into reality.

One moment, the room was empty.

In the next, he appeared, wild-eyed and covered in ash, clutching his midsection. “Ow,” he groaned, staggering. A glance at the makeshift calendar pinned on the wall confirmed his suspicions. “Ha. . . looks like. . . looks like it worked.”

With his remaining strength he hobbled to the wall and sank down against it, letting his legs fall out in front of him. His hands trembled. He tugged lightly at the edge of his shirt, tried to lift it up, then cried out in pain. “Okay,” he panted. “Maybe. . . maybe not such a great idea. Where are the regen pots when you need them?”

He eyed the chests set at the opposite end of the room, then closed his eyes and let out a defeated sigh. His head fell back against the wall. Minutes trickled by, marked by the clock hanging over his head. *Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.*

“I’m gonna die,” he muttered at last. “Sorry to whoever finds my corpse here. Can’t even say it’s a pretty one.”

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

His breathing stuttered and he coughed, grimacing as blood leaked from the corner of his mouth. “I really messed up,” he told the empty room. “Dunno how things are going to go from now.”

“That was a lie,” he amended seconds later, settling back against the wall. “It’s-- gonna go bad. I’ve doomed this timeline. Can’t. . . can’t even do anything about it.” Frustrated tears welled in his eyes. “I’m *useless*.”

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

Without warning, he barked out a harsh laugh, body trembling with the effort of sustaining the noise. “Prime,” he wheezed. His bloodied fingers clawed at the carpet. “I ruined *everything*-- this one chance and I can’t--”

He cut himself off abruptly and closed his eyes, listening as though someone was replying to him. “Stupid,” he muttered. “I gave him all the time in the world. What-- do you think he’s-- gonna do?”

Tick. Tock.

He hesitated, chin sinking down to rest on his chest. “Hope-- is useless,” he choked out. “But. . . it’s the only-- thing-- I-- *hah*-- have left.”

Tick. Tock. Tick.

He laughed again, the sound catching in his throat and coming out as a weak cough. “Well,” he rasped, “Never thought-- I’d be trusting-- *Dream* of all people. ’S up. . . to them. . . I guess.”

Tock.

He blinked, gaze growing distant. His labored breathing stuttered, stopped, and failed to start again. The clock hands inched onwards, unmoved by the corpse cooling on the ground below.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. Tick--

Tick--

Time shuddered. Time rewound. Time folded back on itself and he was gone like he’d never existed.

Agony. Darkness. A flash of light. Crashing back into existence at breakneck speeds. His knees nearly gave out and he stumbled, catching himself on a wall.

“Ow,” he groaned. Looked up. “Ha. . . looks like. . . looks like it worked.”

He slowly sank down against the wall, letting his legs fall out in front of him. His hands were shaking. He tried to lift the edge of his shirt, only to yelp and drop it. “Okay,” he wheezed. “Maybe. . . maybe not such a great idea. Where are the regen pots when you need them?”

Tick. Tock. In the silence of the room, the clock sounded so much louder. A sudden wave of *deja vu* overtook him. He blinked then shook his head, laughing dryly.

“I’m gonna die,” he muttered. “Sorry to whoever finds my corpse in here. Can’t even say it’s a pretty corpse.”

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

“I really messed up,” he told the empty room. “Dunno how things are going to go from now. . . that was a lie.”

He slumped against the wall. “It’s-- gonna go bad. I’ve doomed this timeline. Can’t. . . can’t even do anything about it.” His hands curled into fists. “I’m *useless*.”

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

He threw his head back and laughed, only to choke on the noise as it turned into a sob. “Prime,” he groaned. “I ruined *everything*-- the one chance I had and I can’t--”

Time shuddered. Time rewound. Time folded back on itself and he was gone like he'd never existed.

Darkness. Light. The clock rewound.

Darkness. Light. The clock rewound.

Darkness. Light. The clock--

Over, and over, and over, the cycle went on. Three loopers went back again, and again, and again. The first and the second remembered these resets.

The third did not.

[illegible]

80.

Cold obsidian against his back. Dim light warming one side of his face. The smell of damp stone.

Without opening his eyes, Tommy could already tell where he was.

No, a distant part of his mind shrieked. Prime, please, anywhere but this.

The first time he'd woken up in the past, he'd thought it was a blessing. Dream had still been in prison, and Tommy had wasted no time getting Sam to make sure he *stayed* there. Then he'd gone off to Snowchester and retired from, well, *everything*. He'd built himself a little cabin at the edge of the area. Signed up for therapy with Puffy, alongside Tubbo, Ranboo and Ghostbur. He earned the title of Michael's favorite uncle, taking care of the kid when Ranboo or Tubbo were occupied. He learned to grow and heal and move on.

And then he'd woken up in the past again, this time sitting next to Tubbo on the bench. He'd freaked Tubbo out, frantically demanding to know if Dream was in prison. His friend had been quick to assure him that Dream had just been locked in, that he wouldn't escape. Tommy had believed him and vowed to stay far away from the prison, only to receive the news two days after when he would have visited in the original timeline that Technoblade had broken Dream out. He'd run to Snowchester in a panic, finding Tubbo and Ranboo bundling Michael down into a bunker. After three sleepless nights, huddled together in that bunker, he'd finally passed out from exhaustion.

And woken up in the past for the third time. He'd marched out of his house and screamed profanities at the sky for five minutes straight. It was Ranboo who found him, sobbing on his own front lawn, Mellohi's shards lying at his feet. The rest of that loop passed in a blur, ending with a flash of pink hair and blinding, searing pain.

And now he was waking up in a prison cell with the man who beat him to death four loops ago.

"Fuck," he groaned, opening his eyes. Dream sat curled against the wall opposite him, head down. His tangled, oily hair obscured his face. Good. If Tommy ever saw the bastard's smirk again, it would be too soon.

He pushed himself to his feet and faced the lava. "SAM!" he called, already knowing it would be futile. In the original timeline he'd screamed for the warden until his voice went hoarse. The warden had never replied until *after* Dream beat him to death, and given the lack of blood decorating the cell, Tommy had looped in before that.

Wonderful.

"SAM!" he screamed again. No reply. In the corner of his eye, Dream shifted, one dull green eye becoming visible under the curtain of hair. The bastard remained silent, watching as Tommy shouted the warden's name over and over.

"It's useless," he said at last. Tommy jerked, spinning around to face him, his hands curled into fists.

"Shut the fuck up," he ordered. Dream let out a quiet huff.

"It's useless," he repeated. "He's not going to come."

Tommy squinted at him, half-tempted to flip him off and scream for Sam again. But there was something *off* about the way Dream said it. He didn't sound like he was gloating. No, he sounded. . . tired. Defeated.

"The fuck is up with you?" Tommy blurted. Dream blinked, obviously not expecting the question. "Why do you sound so tired and shit? What happened to all the 'he's not gonna save you, Tommy? You're stuck with me?'"

Dream rolled his eyes. "Maybe I got tired of gloating."

Tommy snorted. "Yeah, right."

Dream shrugged and went back to inspecting the floor. Tommy eyed him with suspicion for a moment, then stalked over to the chest in the corner and yanked it open. He grabbed a book, stomped back over to his spot opposite Dream, and plopped down. Opening it to the first page, he ripped it out and began folding.

He felt eyes on him and tensed, looking up. Dream was watching him. "What?" Tommy snapped.

“What are you doing?” Dream asked.

“None of your business.”

Dream hummed but didn’t look away. Tommy tried to get back into folding, but he couldn’t focus with Dream staring at him. He sent the man a glare. “Do you mind?”

Dream’s gaze darted to the book. “Can I have a page?”

“Get your own book,” Tommy said. He went back to folding.

Dream let out a quiet sigh and slowly pushed himself to his feet. Tommy tensed, fingers freezing on the crease he was making. Shit, he shouldn’t have antagonized Dream. He should’ve just given Dream what he wanted, damnit. But he hadn’t, and now Dream was going to kill him. Again.

But Dream didn’t approach Tommy or start talking to him in that sickly-sweet voice he used so often in exile. Instead he shuffled to the chest, giving Tommy a wide berth. Tommy kept his eyes fixed on his own paper, refusing to relax until Dream sat back down, book in hand. The other man ripped out a piece of paper and began folding.

Slowly, Tommy resumed his own work. For a long time, the only sounds in the cell were the crinkling of paper and the bubbling of lava. It was kinda. . . relaxing, in a way. Disgustingly so. Tommy couldn’t have that.

He eyed one of the completed paper airplanes lying by his leg. *Don’t do it*, a voice in the back of his head warned. *You know what happened last time you annoyed him.*

Tommy decided the voice could go fuck itself. “Hey bitch,” he called. Dream looked up just in time to get a paper airplane to the face. Tommy watched in amusement as the prisoner reeled back, head whacking against the obsidian wall.

“Ow! Fuck!” Dream pitched forward, clutching his eye. “What the hell was that for?!”

“For being a bitch,” Tommy quipped, ignoring the frantic *HE’S ANGRY! ABORT! ABORT!* going on in the back of his head. “Bitch.”

Dream stared at him for a long moment, then went back to folding his own paper.

Tommy scowled and threw another paper airplane at him. It flew through the air in a graceful arc and bounced harmlessly off Dream’s head. The man flinched but didn’t look up, focusing on his paper. Tommy threw another paper airplane. And then another. Dream’s eye twitched. Tommy grinned.

The grin slid off his face when a clunking sound echoed through the cell. Both prisoners looked up as the tiny metal door in the wall slid up, revealing several potatoes.

“Lunchtime,” Dream muttered, getting to his feet. Tommy remained seated, watching as Dream collected the potatoes from the slot. The other man dropped most of the potatoes on the lectern, grabbing two. He turned to Tommy and held one out. “Here.”

Tommy tried to reach out to take it, but his hands wouldn't move. He was sitting on the ground and Dream was standing over him, a potato in hand. His breathing quickened. "I--" he croaked. "I'm not taking shit from you, bitch."

Dream's gaze strayed to his shaking hands. Something like realization dawned in his eyes. "Tommy," he said slowly. "Tommy, have we done this before?"

Tommy felt the blood drain from his face. He stared up at Dream and remained silent.

"You're back too," Dream said. He took a step forward. "You came back too."

"No," Tommy whispered. The world was falling out from under him, and horrible, *terrible* coldness was spreading through his stomach. "*No*. Anyone but you."

"Are you in a loop?" Dream asked. Another step forward. "Is this your fourth time too?"

"Stay away," Tommy choked out, his voice rising. He pressed himself into the wall. "Stay the *fuck* away from me!"

Dream stopped in his tracks. His gaze travelled down to the potato he was still gripping in one hand. "Ah," he said. He dropped the potato and kicked it away. Tommy watched as it rolled across the cell, disappearing behind the lectern.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Dream tried.

"Shut the fuck up."

Dream didn't shut up. "Tommy, you're-- we're trapped in a time loop, right?"

Tommy squeezed his eyes shut. "Stop. Stop talking."

"That's what's happening to you, right? This is the fourth time--"

"*Stop.*"

"We can work together, Tommy, if we work together we can break out--"

"I SAID, SHUT UP!"

Dream paused. Tommy realized distantly that he was crying, eyes staring straight through the man who had murdered him three timelines ago. He felt like he was falling, strangled with never ending panic. His hands clawed at his chest as the same, terrible fact repeated again and again in his mind.

Dream is also in a time loop.

Dream, who killed him. Who forced Tubbo to exile him. Who-- who--

"*It's okay to call it abuse,*" Puffy had told him two timelines ago, when he'd finally opened up to her during their fifth session. "*It's not a weakness to admit that you were abused,*

Tommy.”

Who abused him.

And now Tommy was stuck in a thrice-damned timeloop with him.

His ears were ringing, the haunting sound that followed every explosion. He breathed in and tasted smoke. Every loop started at a different time. How long would it be until one started in exile?

“Put your things in the hole, Tommy.”

“Please,” he whispered, shakily reaching up to clutch his head in a pathetic attempt to shield himself. He didn’t know who he was begging. “Please, no. *Please.*”

There was no one around to hear him. No one except the one man he had never wanted to see again.

And now he was trapped with him. Alone. In a time loop for the rest of eternity.

Tommy dug his nails into his skin and *screamed*.

90.

His ears were ringing. He could smell smoke. Sticks and stones dug into his back.

“Tommy,” Dream said.

Tommy kept his eyes closed. Maybe if he played dead, Dream would leave him alone.

No such luck. “Tommy,” Dream repeated, sounding slightly impatient. “Stop avoiding me.”

Tommy opened his eyes to glare up at him. “Fuck you.” He promptly rolled over and shut his eyes.

There was a low sigh. “We have to work together if we want a way out,” Dream said.

“Fuck you,” Tommy repeated.

“You can’t ignore me forever.”

“I’ve done it pretty well for the last ten loops.”

Another sigh. Dream sure sighed a lot. Tommy hoped he exhaled his lungs. “Tommy. . .”

Tommy opened his eyes again to glare at the landscape. From where he was laying he could see the edge of the ocean, where the waves lapped at the sand. “I’m not working with you.”

“I know we’ve had our differences,” Dream said. Tommy rolled his eyes. “But if we want to get out of this, we have to set them aside.”

“Prime, could you get any more cliché?” Tommy pushed himself into a sitting position. “You really think I’m just gonna forget everything you did?”

“No, I don’t,” Dream snapped. “But you’re the only other person in this loop. If we work together, we can get out of this quicker. I’m willing to ignore our past conflicts--”

“Oh, *you’re* willing to ignore it?” Tommy rose to his feet, ignoring the burning in his legs. “Remind me who the *wrongen* is here?”

Dream sneered. “Don’t act like you’re innocent--”

“And don’t act like you are either,” Tommy shot back. “You’re a fucking control freak with a god complex and literally nothing to show for it. You blew up my nation, you took all *three* of my canon lives, you a-abused me in exile-- you’re the reason everyone on this fucking server is miserable! You think I’m just gonna forget that?!”

“You came on the server, and the first thing you did was threaten to break the rules!” Dream shouted. “I just wanted a safe world where everyone could get along! Then you and Wilbur decided-- decided to just go off and make a nation-- on *my* server-- without even asking me!”

“We did ask you! You chose violence!”

“You didn’t ask-- you *told* me *after* you built the place! I didn’t want to fight, but you forced me to! Everything was fine, and then you and Wilbur decided to fuck it up because you were *bored*!”

“We just wanted somewhere to be free!”

“You *were* free!”

“Not with your fucking rules hanging over our heads!”

Dream gritted his teeth, his fingernails digging into the palms of his hands. “The *rules* are in place for a *reason*.”

“What, so you can feed your superiority complex?!”

“To keep the server in *one piece*!” Dream thrust a hand in the direction of Logstedshire. “You decided to break them-- now look where we are!”

Tommy was shaking. “Don’t act like you’re the victim,” he hissed. “Don’t you fucking *dare* act like we hurt you.”

“Yeah?” Dream growled. “What do you call the shit that happened in prison then?”

Tommy laughed. It sounded off to his own ears. “If I recall correctly, *you* weren’t the one that got beaten to death.”

An odd glint entered Dream's eyes. "That's not what I was talking about," he said. Like he was brushing it off. Like he just expected Tommy to brush off *his own fucking death*.

Static filled Tommy's ears. He felt light, far away. His ribcage tightened, lungs constricting.

"Fuck you," he breathed. His eyes were burning. "Fuck-- fuck you."

Dream tilted his head, watching him like he was an interesting specimen.

Tommy *snapped*.

"FUCK YOU!" he screamed, lunging forward and punching Dream straight across the face. The man staggered back, raising his arms to fend off the blows Tommy rained down upon him. "FUCK YOU, YOU *BASTARD!*"

"Tommy-- wait--"

Tommy did not wait. He tackled Dream and slammed him to the ground, wedging an arm under his chin. "I was *HEALING!*" he howled. His voice sounded more animal than human. "I WAS HEALING, AND THEN YOU-- YOU BEAT ME TO DEATH FOR YOUR OWN SICK SATISFACTION! You killed me so you could-- so you could prove a *point!* You took my THIRD CANON LIFE to PROVE A *FUCKING POINT!*"

He punched Dream again. Cracks spiderwebbed across the surface of the mask, but its blank smile remained firmly in place. The teenager leaned closer until their faces were inches apart.

"You don't know what death feels like," he snarled. "You don't know what *Limbo* feels like. The fucking-- *emptiness*, the *pain*-- and you-- you left me in there for *two fucking days*. *Just so you could prove a point*. And *then*, just when I woke up in the past and-- and I thought things would get better, that maybe I had a second chance at life-- I find out I'm in a *fucking TIME LOOP* with *YOU!*"

His own words rang in his ears. Tommy glared, panting, down at Dream. The man remained silent, his expression hidden behind a layer of porcelain. Tommy imagined his face. Imagined the sick grin he had when he first revived Tommy.

His bloody knuckles collided with the mask. Dream's head jerked, but he made no attempt to fight back.

"Fuck you," Tommy spat again. He wanted to kill Dream. Murder him with his bare hands. But then he'd wake up in the next loop, and Dream would be alive again. It was pointless.

And fuck, Tommy was *tired*.

All at once, the inferno in his chest went out. He slumped forward, prying his fingers one by one from the death grip he had on the front of Dream's hoodie. Slowly, lethargically, he pushed himself up and stumbled a few feet away. The other man remained silent, spread out on his back in the sand.

". . . Don't follow me," Tommy bit out.

He turned and staggered off in the general direction of the Arctic, Dream's gaze burning into the back of his head.

95.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Tommy was wrong. Tommy was *wrong*.

("YOU BEAT ME TO DEATH FOR YOUR OWN SICK SATISFACTION!")

He did it because he was angry. Tommy killed his cat, the one thing he'd formed an attachment to. The one thing on the server that still cared about him. That still *loved* him.

("You killed me so you could-- so you could prove a point! You took my THIRD CANON LIFE to PROVE A FUCKING POINT!")

Tommy had called him a liar. So he'd offered proof. What else was he supposed to do?

("You a-abused me in exile--")

It wasn't abuse. He'd been teaching Tommy a lesson. Making him *better*. Because Tommy caused problems. All he did was cause problems. He was spoiled. Immature. He thought he owned the world. So Dream had taken it away from him, shown him how *powerless* he was--

("You're a fucking control freak with a god complex!")

Tommy locked him in the prison. Tommy let Quackity hurt him. Tommy had *no idea* what it felt like to be trapped in those obsidian walls, cowering in the corner and praying that Quackity wouldn't appear.

Tommy didn't know what it felt like to be tortured.

("You don't know what Limbo feels like. The fucking-- emptiness, the pain-- and you-- you left me in there for two fucking days.")

Tommy didn't know what it felt like to lose everything.

("Dream! DREAM! NO! STOP, PLEASE! I'M SORRY-- PLEASE, NO! I WON'T DO IT AGAIN, PLEASE!")

Tommy didn't know what it felt like to look into a bubbling wall of lava and-- and imagine--

("It's never my time to die.")

Dream tore his mask off and vomited into the sand.

“I’m not Quackity,” he whispered to the ocean. His words disappeared into the sea breeze. He raised his voice. “I’m *not*. ”

Funny, a voice in his mind replied. It sounded a lot like George. *Have you noticed how everyone sounds the same when they’re begging for their lives?*

“It’s different,” Dream muttered, pulling his knees closer to his chest. “Quackity hurt me because he could. He said it was for the book, but-- but we both knew I would never give it up. He kept visiting anyway. He-- he tortured me because he *could*.”

And you hurt Tommy because you could?

"No!"

Then why?

“He needed to *learn*, ” Dream snapped. “He’s done nothing but cause problems since he joined the server. He tore everyone apart. He turned them against me.”

You turned them against yourself.

“He turned them against me,” Dream repeated.

You hurt him.

“I was fixing him.”

You killed him.

“It was to prove a point.”

Then why did you enjoy it?

Dream’s jaw twitched. It was true. He’d smiled as Tommy begged for his life, laughed as he stood over the corpse, his hands dripping with blood. He’d felt *exhilarated*.

Powerful. You felt powerful, and that made you happy.

“Maybe I did,” he agreed. “But I was trapped. Powerless. Being able to *fight back* after months in that prison--”

Don’t make excuses. The voice turned sharp. Angry. It didn’t sound like George anymore. *Exile made you happy too. You weren’t trapped, then.*

Dream gritted his teeth. “I didn’t--”

You hurt Tommy because it made you feel powerful. Just like Quackity hurt you because he wanted to feel powerful.

“No, that’s--”

The voice continued, ruthless. *Who wouldn’t want to hurt the monster of the server? Who wouldn’t want to hurt the person **responsible for this mess**? Tommy was the only one who defied your rules, who turned your server into **this--***

“I’m not Quackity,” he protested, but it sounded weak to his own ears.

No, the voice agreed. You’re worse. Much, much worse. Because you deserved it, and Tommy didn’t.

Dream stared at the setting sun and said nothing. There was something like recognition hovering in the back of his mind, a slow, stomach-curling awareness that what he’d done was *wrong*. He didn’t want to acknowledge it. Didn’t want to think about it.

You know I’m right.

“Shut up,” he whispered. He could feel the realization rising over him like a tidal wave, hanging in the throes of gravity.

You abused him. You tortured him.

“I’m not. . . I didn’t. . .”

*You destroyed everything he cared about and took him and **broke him**.*

He dug his nails into his skull and remained silent.

He begged you, Dream. Like you begged Quackity. Do you remember? Do you remember his voice?

“. . . Yes,” he whispered. The word came out as a fragile, broken thing. “I do.”

Say it. Say the fucking truth, for once in your life.

“I. . .” his voice cracked. “I was wrong. I-- I hurt him because I could. I *manipulated* him, destroyed his country, abu. . . abused him--”

He stopped. Blinked back the burning in his eyes. He was shaking and he couldn’t stop.

“I abused him,” he repeated. Saying it out loud made it worse, in a way, because admitting it to the sea meant he was acknowledging it as a truth. His own voice echoed in his ears, sickly sweet and laced with poison.

Quackity had talked the same way.

(“I’m your friend, Tommy.”)

("You did this to yourself, Dream. It doesn't have to be this way-- just give me the book.")

The tsunami loomed ever closer, a torrent of terror and guilt and self-hatred. Dream took a shuddering inhale. "I'm. . ." he croaked. "I'm worse than Quackity. I'm a monster."

You are. There was no vindictive pleasure at his acknowledgement, only a quiet fury. *And you'll live as one for the rest of eternity.*

The wave came crashing down, dragging Dream under.

Private Messaging: TommyInnit

<Dream>: im sorry

<Dream>: illeave you alone

[3:49 AM]

<TommyInnit>: fuck you.

97.

When Dream had gone on a mining expedition, he hadn't expected to stumble across an underground cavern. The place was *huge* and completely enclosed, with no tunnels in or out aside from the one he'd dug. He wasn't quite sure where he was in relation to the aboveground SMP, but he was pretty sure this place was located under inhabited lands. Strangely, nobody seemed to have discovered it yet.

He raised his torch higher, inspecting the walls. Underneath the thick layer of grime, he could see the outline of uniform stone bricks. Scraping away the layer of dirt on the floor revealed the same thing. He revised his earlier thought; this wasn't a cavern, it was a *room*. An old room that had been abandoned for quite a while, but it definitely hadn't formed naturally. Strangely enough, the entire place was devoid of life; the room was bathed in darkness - perfect spawning conditions for hostile mobs - and yet there wasn't a single mob in sight.

Dream adjusted his grip on his pickaxe, ignoring the chill that slithered down his spine. He advanced further into the room.

The withered remains of what might have once been pillars jutted out of the floor at regular intervals, built from the same stone as the rest of the room. They appeared to have been destroyed rather than worn away with age; the tops of the ruins were jagged, like the pillars had been smashed to pieces. Chunks of rubble strewn over the floor cemented that theory.

He was about thirty feet in when he saw it. A thin string the color of redstone, nestled in the cracks between two stones. He squatted down to inspect it, only to realize that the string had no visible end-- it continued on into the darkness, originating from somewhere out of the bubble of light from the torch.

Dream rose to his feet. More strings appeared as he moved further in, gradually growing thicker. It wasn't until they'd grown to the width of his ankle Dream realized what they were - vines. Crimson vines as thick as his leg, flourishing in a lightless room. The arrangement suggested they were all growing from a central point - a point that Dream was approaching.

Something glinted in the torchlight. Dream froze in his tracks, but when the object did not move, he moved closer. Whatever it was, it was *huge*. He lifted the torch a bit higher-- and stared.

“What the fuck is this?”

It looked like an egg. A blood-red egg three times the size of a grown man, with vines sprouting from its base. He'd never seen the thing before, and yet. . .

“You look familiar,” he muttered, eyes narrowing. Where had he seen it before?

"Oh right," he realized. Bad had shown it to him back in December, before the whole shitshow with Tommy and the discs. He'd basically forgotten about it after spending two years in prison, though in the blurry memories of his escape, he thought he'd seen red vines on the ground. There weren't any in the arctic, though, so maybe he hadn't. He'd been pretty out of it.

DR毛爪 .

Dream whipped around, slashing his torch through the darkness. “Who’s there?!”

DR毛爪 山爪 爪毛爪 .

“That’s me, yeah,” he muttered, eyes darting back and forth. “Who are you? Where are you?”

乃毛爪 / 爪 丫 爪 .

Dream turned around. No matter how hard he looked, the only thing he could see was--

“Are you the egg?”

Y毛5.

Dream let out a huff of disbelief. “Okay,” he said. “You’re-- sentient. You’re a sentient, giant talking egg.”

Y毛\$. The Egg (apparently) hummed. 山#凡T /5 /T Y田山 D毛5/尺
毛 爪田5T, D尺毛凡爪 山凡5 T凡K毛几?

Dream blinked. “I-- what?”

山#凡T D田 Y田山 山凡几T?

Dream hesitated. He had absolutely no reason to trust the Egg, but-- it was just an egg. Harmless-- it couldn’t even move. It wasn’t like the Egg (or whatever the fuck it was) would remember anything he told it next loop. And he-- he really wanted to talk to someone. By the time this loop started, he had basically no friends or allies left.

“... I want a lot of things,” he admitted. “Mostly just-- to get out of the loops, for one. And to become a better person.”

T#毛 厶田田 P\$?

“Yeah. Time loops. I’ve gone through. . . ninety, now.”

山#Y D田 Y田山 山/5# T田 毛5C凡P毛?

“I’m trapped. I don’t-- nothing I do matters anymore.” He laughed. “Hell, I could slaughter everyone on this server and-- and next loop, they’d all be walking around again. I could become *friends* with everyone on the server and next loop we’d just go back to being enemies.” He took a deep breath. “I hate it. It’s. . . it’s. . . it *hurts*, when I wake up and-- everything’s back to the way it was.”

The Egg remained silent for a moment. / 5毛毛, it said at last. / 山/厶厶 千尺毛毛
Y田山.

Dream’s heart stilled. He could barely breathe, overwhelmed by a rush of hope. “You can. . . you can do that?”

7田/几 爪毛, D尺毛凡爪. / 山/厶厶 G/V毛 Y田山 凡几Y T# /几G
Y田山 山/5# 千田尺.

The statement should have set off alarm bells in his head, but. . . he felt like he could trust the Egg. No, he *knew* he could trust the Egg. It had no reason to harm him. It was just trying to help. It was being a good friend. He wanted that, didn’t he?

Dream was distantly aware that his torch had gone out, but he couldn’t think past the pounding in his ears. The Egg was glowing, effusing the room with scarlet light. It was powerful. It would help him. Dream took a breath.

“What do I have to do?”

“Tommy!”

Tommy stopped in his tracks. “Dream.”

“Hey,” Dream said. He sounded-- happy, almost. “Can I talk to you?”

Tommy sneered, turning around with a *fuck you* on his lips. And froze. “Oh,” he breathed. “Oh *shit*.”

Dream smiled, oblivious to his sudden wariness. “Hi, Tommy.”

Tommy ran through a quick mental checklist. Red eyes? Check. Red clothes? Check. Deranged smile? Check-- though the last mark probably had less to do with being an egghead and more with the man’s mental stability (or lack of it). “Lemme guess,” he said. “You’re here to take me to the Egg?”

“Yes,” Dream said, then did a double take. “Wait, you know about the Egg?”

“Yeah,” Tommy muttered. He eyed the distance between them, trying to gauge whether he could make a run for it. “It was a . . . big thing, while you were in jail.”

Dream’s smile faltered slightly at the mention of the prison. He recovered quickly. “Then-- then you know how amazing it is?”

“I wouldn’t say *amazing*,” Tommy hedged, inching backward. He couldn’t outrun Dream, but the Egg had definitely affected his intelligence, much like how it had affected Bad’s. Maybe he could trick him into letting him go? “It made Tubbo cry.”

“The Egg can give you anything you want.”

“Right, and I suppose the Egg can give me women.”

“The Egg can give you all the women you could--”

“I’m gonna stop you right there,” Tommy interrupted, fighting back a visceral reaction. Dream was an egghead and trying to bribe Tommy with women. Tommy wasn’t sure whether he should burst into hysterical laughter or start screaming. Either would be an appropriate response to the situation. “I’m not going to the Egg, Dream.”

“Hear me out,” Dream pleaded. Tommy took another step back, only for Dream to step forward. “It knows how to break the loops, Tommy. It can get us out of this.”

“No,” Tommy snapped. Dream probably hadn’t been Infected for as long as Bad was-- maybe he could reason with him. “Look, I’m not-- I’ve seen the Egg, and it doesn’t do *shit*. It’s *lying*, Dream-- It can’t-- it can’t get us out of the loops.”

Dream narrowed his eyes. “You don’t know that.”

Tommy scoffed. “You know what happened to Bad? He was the one who found it in Loop Zero-- ended up serving it because the Egg took Skeppy and Bad thought the only way to get him back was to join him. He ended up hurting a whole bunch of people and lost most of his friends-- all for the Egg. It’s a fuckin’ manipulator, Dream. It’s using you.”

Dream scowled. “The Egg is my *friend*,” he snapped. “It wants to help me.”

Tommy laughed. “If it really wanted to get you out,” he said, “wouldn’t it have done it by now?”

“These. . . these things take time.”

“Yeah? But now it’s just yelling at you to kill me, ey? The only *other* looper.”

Doubt flickered across Dream’s face. Tommy pounced on the opening. “The Egg doesn’t want to help you,” he insisted. “It’s lying. It’s using you to get more power. You *know* that, you’re just too much of a pussy to admit you got tricked.”

Dream’s axe wavered. “I. . . I don’t-- *gah!*”

Tommy took a step back as Dream hunched over, dropping his axe in favor of clamping his hands over his ears. Church Prime was nearby; if he ran now, while Dream was distracted, he could probably stay ahead of Dream long enough to get to safety.

Dream went still. Tommy made an executive decision and *bolted*.

He was maybe halfway down the Prime Path when he glanced back, only to speed up when he saw Dream bearing down on him, eyes blazing crimson. “YOU DON’T HAVE TO DO THIS!” he shrieked, hoping against hope that someone would hear him.

“Come with me,” Dream called, sounding slightly strained.

Tommy flipped him off and ran even faster. The Church was in sight now. He just had to make it another hundred feet or so and then--

A low whistling noise filled the air. Tommy threw himself sideways just as a bundle of TNT landed where he had been standing moments before. The resulting explosion knocked him flat on his back. He ruthlessly stomped down the memories that were trying to resurface and staggered to his feet, shaking his head in a futile attempt to rid his ears of the ringing noise. Dream was approaching with broad strides, clearly confident that he had trapped Tommy.

Unfortunately for him, Tommy had a habit of unpleasantly surprising people.

He reached into his inventory, grabbed the first thing he could find, and hurled it at Dream before booking it. The moment the Holy Lands were within reach, he lunged forward, landing on the grass and rolling with the fall. He hastily pushed himself to his feet and stood, ignoring his screaming muscles.

Dream stopped in his tracks, mere *inches* from the border of the Holy Lands. His gaze flitted across the Church before landing on Tommy. He shifted his grip on his axe.

Tommy stepped back, well out of axe range. "No fighting on the Holy Lands," he reminded him.

Dream glared but complied, lowering his weapon. "Tommy," he said. "You're making this difficult."

"Yeah, well, that's what I do, innit?" Tommy snarked. "Make everything difficult."

"The Egg can *help* us, Tommy. It can get us out--"

"And even if it could, we'd be stuck under its control after we're out. No freedom there."

"It doesn't control us."

Tommy raised an eyebrow. "Yeah? Then what was that little show back there?"

"It was. . . talking to me."

"Seemed to give you a headache." When Dream remained silent, Tommy sighed. "Look, Dream-- just-- no. Leave. I'm not gonna join your shitty egg cult-- I've been recruited way too many times, and it never turns out good."

"It's-- it'll be different," Dream said.

Tommy scoffed. "Look, no means no. What part did you miss? The n, the o, or the silent 'fuck off' in the middle?"

Dream's eyes narrowed. He stepped forward and Tommy readied himself for another chase, accompanied by some grand spiel about the Egg.

It never came. Dream froze, face going blank. Slowly, he took another step forward. The crimson in his eyes suddenly seemed less prominent.

Tommy blinked. What was happening?

"I. . ." Dream frowned, shaking his head. "The Egg-- it's. . ."

"Bad," Tommy said bluntly. His eyes strayed down to Dream's feet, which had crossed onto Holy Land. Due to Dream's early disappearance and Tommy's meddling, the Egg hadn't been discovered and the Eggpire hadn't formed. The Egg might have been weakened by its lack of followers, so maybe it was more susceptible to everything Prime-related - even the Holy Lands.

Something flickered across Dream's face. Tommy revised his earlier assessment-- the proximity to the Church might be a factor, but some part of Dream also appeared to be fighting the Infection. All Tommy had to do was give him another push.

"It's lying, Dream."

"It'll get us out," Dream repeated, sounding less like a human and more like a broken record.

"Which it hasn't done," Tommy pointed out. "I bet if I killed you right now, you'd just wake up in the past again."

"You're. . . lying," Dream said. It came out stilted. He frowned and shook his head, like a dog trying to rid itself of a gnat. When he looked up again, his eyes were a solid crimson. "You're lying to me. Making me doubt. The Egg doesn't like that."

"Yeah, well, the Egg can go fuck itself."

Dream looked sad. Wait, no, that was wrong. He looked *disappointed*, shoulders pulled back and disapproving stare affixed on Tommy. Tommy had felt that stare many, many times in exile.

"I'm sorry about this, Tommy," Dream said. He was using the 'it's for your own good' voice. Fuck. "But when I bring you back, you'll see. The loop won't start again. The Egg ended it."

Tommy took a moment to process those words. A moment too long, apparently, because suddenly there was netherite in his neck and then *agony agony ag--*

98.

He opened his eyes to see Dream disappearing in a puff of smoke.

Tommy stumbled, the axe slipping from his fingers. "Oh shit," he gasped, staggering forward even as he raised his hands to his throat. "Shit-- fuck-- Dream! Dream, you-- *you fucker*-- what the *fuck* is wrong with you?!"

There was a moment of chilling silence. And then Dream *howled*.

The crowd gathered behind Tommy collectively flinched, several falling back into fighting stances. Tommy paid them no mind. "DREAM!" he shouted.

The screams tapered off into retching. A cold pit formed in Tommy's stomach. "DREAM," he shouted again. "DREAM, CAN YOU HEAR ME? IS IT STILL THERE?"

"In my--" there was a crash. "Nonono I did it again I'm sorry please no get out get out get OUT--"

A hand landed on Tommy's shoulder, burning hot. "Tommy, what the hell is going on?!"

“Later,” Tommy snapped. “Get down here, let us help--”

Dream hissed. “No-- shut up. SHUT UP--”

“Tommy,” Sapnap snarled.

“FIGHT IT, DAMNIT!” Tommy shouted. “IT’S FUCKIN’ WEAK RIGHT NOW!”

Dream’s ragged breathing cut off with a hiss. Tommy gritted his teeth.

“Fuck it,” he muttered. “Who’s the fastest person here?”

“Tommy--”

“Dream got-- Infected,” Tommy snapped, scrambling for a way to explain without telling them about the timeloops-- they didn’t have *time*. “By a-- by a brain parasite, fuck, I don’t know what the fuck it is but it changed his thought process and shit-- killing him snapped him outta it, but if we want to keep the thing *out* of his head, we need to dunk him in Prime water.”

Several people went pale. “He’s. . .?” Puffy asked.

She was cut off by a loud thud above them. “Shit,” Tommy cursed, rushing forward and vaulting onto the platform. It rose under his weight, accompanied by the rumble of redstone.

The moment his head cleared the top, he assessed the situation. Dream was lying on the floor next to the bed he’d respawned from, curled in a ball and fingers tangled in his hair. His cloak was a familiar dark green, but Tommy wasn’t reassured.

“Dream,” he said loudly. The man jerked, head raising just enough for Tommy to see one eye - stretched wide and pupil shrunk, darting wildly back and forth. The iris oscillated between toxic green and pale crimson.

So the Egg could reach across loops. Even worse, it could reach across *deaths*-- which meant that if Tommy just killed Dream or threw him in the prison, he’d come back next loop still Infected and still determined to kill Tommy and/or drag him to the Egg.

Tommy took a deep breath and shoved down his rising panic. The Egg’s hold had obviously been weakened, though Tommy wasn’t sure if it was because of the loops or because Dream had been on Holy Lands. Dream was actively fighting it now, though, so that was a bonus. Either way, there was still a chance he could fix this.

“Dream,” he repeated. “I can get you to Church Prime, but I need to know if you’re gonna stab me.”

Dream managed a jerky shake of his head. Tommy strode forward and yanked him up, slinging an arm over his shoulder and letting the man use him as a crutch. His skin crawled with discomfort, but he reminded himself that this was better than having to deal with an Infected Dream hunting him down for the rest of the loop. They somehow managed to make

it onto the platform without any issues. When it started moving, though, Dream nearly fell over, forcing Tommy to yank him back up.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Figh-ting,” Dream grunted. “Doesn’t-- like that.”

“Yeah I bet it doesn’t,” Tommy muttered. The others were in sight now, but still out of hearing range. Tommy lowered his voice. “Listen, I told the others the Egg possessed you or some shit and killing you woke you up, so stick to that story this loop-- unless you want to get tossed in the Vault again.”

Dream shuddered, head lolling. “You lied.”

Tommy blinked. “I-- of fuckin’ course I lied, what else was I--”

“We’re back again, you made me-- no-- shut *up*--”

Ah. He was talking to the Egg, not Tommy. “Ignore it. It gets worse the more you talk to it.”

The platform had reached the bottom. Tommy wasted no time dragging the other looper forward, thrusting him straight into Punz, who stumbled at the sudden weight. “The Church,” Tommy blurted. “Dump-- dump him in the waterfall, *hurry* or--”

Punz was gone before he’d finished talking. Tommy swallowed the bitter taste in his mouth, shoving away a memory of the mercenary’s blank expression as he slid a sword into Quackity’s back. Punz had never been on their side, had he?

“T-Tommy?”

Tommy flinched and whipped around, meeting Tubbo’s gaze. His friend twitched, gaze darting from Tommy’s shaking hands to his face.

“Are you okay?”

Okay? He was the *furthest fucking thing* from okay.

“I need to check on Dream,” was all he said. He was the only one with knowledge about the Egg at this moment in time. He needed to see if it was really out of Dream’s head. Needed to, because if it wasn’t-- if it was *still there*, the loops would get a whole lot worse.

“Tommy--”

“Sorry, Tubbo.” He brushed past him, stumbling towards the portal. “I need-- it’s *important*--”

“Wait,” Sapnap said. Tommy rounded on him with the fiercest glare he could muster, but Sapnap stood his metaphorical ground. “What happened?”

“I told you already--”

“You told us he got infected with a ‘brain parasite’. That--”

“Look, I’ll fuckin’ explain *later*,” Tommy snapped. “When this is over, we can hunt down the Egg and burn it to ashes, but right now I need to make sure it’s not still in his head.”

“Egg?” Tubbo asked, but Tommy was distracted by Sam, who had appeared on his left, eyes concerned.

“Tommy, you’re in no shape to travel through the Nether. Let us handle this.”

“I’m the only one who knows what we’re dealing with--”

“So tell us.”

Tommy bit back the urge to scream in frustration and whipped around, storming towards the portal. Someone attempted to grab his arm but he shook them off.

“I’m going to the fucking Church,” he snarled, and leapt into the portal before anyone could stop him.

The first thing Tommy saw when he entered the Church was Dream, drenched to the bone and collapsed on a pew beside the waterfall. Punz was sitting on the opposite end of the pew, gaze fixed straight ahead and sword lying across his lap. His eyes flicked to Tommy as he entered. “I put him in the waterfall. He’s semi-coherent now.”

“Can he still hear it?” Tommy demanded.

“It’s very quiet,” Dream rasped.

“So that’s a yes. *Fuck.*”

Punz eyed the waterfall. “We didn’t try drinking it. Is it safe?”

“Yeah, drinking it might be better.” Tommy glanced at his inventory, then at Punz. “Bucket?”

Punz wordlessly produced a bucket, dumping the water it contained onto the carpet of the Church before handing it to him. Tommy scooped a chunk out of the waterfall and held it out to Dream, who took it with shaking hands.

They watched in silence as Dream took several gulps of water, then shook his head. The last of the red tint faded from his pupils.

“It’s gone,” he reported. Punz sighed and closed his eyes, only to stiffen when voices became audible in the distance.

Tommy went still, his heart racing. He wasn't ready. Judging by Dream's expression, he wasn't either. Punz took one look at them and stood, stashing his sword in his inventory.

"I'll stall them," he said. "Five minutes sound okay?"

"Ten," Tommy said.

"Ten," Punz agreed. He turned and stalked out of the Church.

The silence was deafening. Tommy looked anywhere but at Dream, staring at the window to their left like it offered all the secrets of the universe. He remained tense, half-expecting Dream to attack him. Dream, for his part, was just as uncomfortable, fidgeting as the silence grew more and more strained.

"Here," he blurted, thrusting the bucket towards Tommy and nearly dropping it when his muscles reminded him that there were consequences to respawning (and being Infected, on top of that). "I, uh, don't need it anymore."

Tommy snatched the bucket from his hands, grateful for a distraction. He hurried over to the waterfall and tipped the bucket over, pouring the remaining water out.

"I'm sorry," Dream croaked.

Tommy stilled, knuckles white around the handle of the bucket. He didn't turn around.

Dream closed his eyes. "I'm sorry," he repeated. "I know an apology isn't worth anything, but. . . I get it now."

"Do you?" Tommy asked stiffly.

"I do. Tommy, I-- I wasn't your friend. I lied to you. I hurt you because. . . because I enjoyed it. Not because you deserved it. It was-- it was abuse. I abused you."

Tommy stared down at the carpet, trying to sort through the whirlpool of emotions in his chest. On one hand, hearing Dream *acknowledge* what he'd done was the final confirmation-- the last vindication that let him know he'd been in the right all along. But at the same time, Dream could be lying. Trying to manipulate him into working together.

"You did," he said at last.

"I'm sorry," Dream murmured. He *sounded* sincere. Just like he'd sounded sincere when he told Tommy he was his friend.

"You're sorry," Tommy repeated, turning around.

Dream ducked his head, hiding his expression. His face was an open book-- probably why he wore a mask. "I am," he affirmed.

"I don't believe you."

“Okay,” Dream said. He looked away from Tommy, picking at the hem of his hoodie. “I-- yeah. That’s fair.”

Tommy stared at him.

Dream took a deep breath. “I wasn’t lying in those messages,” he said. “I’ll. . . leave you alone. Give you space for as long as you want.”

Tommy snorted. “Yeah? And what brought on your sudden change of heart?”

Dream opened his mouth. Closed it. Picked a string off his hoodie. “I. . . looked at what I did from. From an outsider’s perspective.”

So that’s all it took. All it would have taken Dream to stop being such a dick was some basic human empathy. Tommy gritted his teeth.

“This better not be another lie, Dream, or I swear--”

“It’s not,” Dream promised. “I-- you don’t have any reason to trust me, but-- really. I’ll stay as far away from you as I can.”

Right. Well, the only way to figure out if this was a lie was to test it. If he was faking, he’d probably crack and hunt Tommy down before twenty loops had passed. If he was genuinely apologetic. . .

Tommy shook himself. “Can you still hear the Egg?”

Dream blinked at the non sequitur. “I-- no. No, it’s gone.”

“Then I’m leaving. You can explain what happened to the others.”

Tommy stared at Dream, waiting for the other man to protest or reach out. Dream stayed where he was. “I’m not stopping you.”

It felt like a trap. Tommy kept his eyes on Dream even as he retreated towards the door. Dream just laid back against the pew and closed his eyes. He was letting him go.

Tommy all but fled the Church, his pulse pounding in his ears.

99.

“Listen, can I. . . can I ask you about something?”

“Go ahead,” Puffy said. Tommy clasped his hands and looked down at the floor.

“So there’s this. . . this person. He hurt me. A lot.” He bit the inside of his cheek, fiddling with his fingers. “He tried to kill my friends. He tried to kill *me*. ”

Puffy remained silent. Patient. Tommy let out a huff, glaring down at the floor. He sank a little further into the plush chair he was sitting in. "He's trying to do better now. Or, at least that's what he *says*. He-- I told him to stay away from me. And. And he's respected that. Fuck, he even apologized to me." He ran a hand through his hair. "But I don't-- he apologized, he's trying to do better, so everything's fine, right? I should just-- stop bitching and forgive him--"

"Tommy," Puffy said firmly. Tommy slowly looked up to meet her gaze. "Just because he apologized doesn't mean that you have to forgive him."

"But he's better now," Tommy muttered. "He's *trying*."

"Forgiveness depends on you," Puffy said. "Do you understand? Not him. *You*. Forgive him when you feel ready."

Tommy snorted. "And if I never feel ready?"

"Then never forgive him." At Tommy's startled look, she frowned. "You don't owe him anything, Tommy. He hurt you in the past, and *maybe* he's starting to become a better person, but that doesn't mean you have to forgive him."

Tommy gnawed on the inside of his cheek. "Okay," he started slowly. "I . . . I get that. But there's. . . there's a bit more to it. It's-- complicated, but-- we're. We're kinda stuck in this situation where-- where I gotta-- *ugh*."

Puffy waited patiently as he buried his face in his hands and took a few deep breaths.

"Okay," he said at last. "So-- hypothetically--"

"Hypothetically," Puffy corrected.

"Hypothetically, if, like, someone was trapped in-- a room. With. With someone who hurt them a-- a long time ago. And they both need to find a way out, and-- and it looks like the only way they can do that is if they work with-- *him* -- wh-what do they do?" He glared down at his hands. "Fuck-- this is a terrible analogy."

Puffy hummed. "Would they die if they stay in the room?"

Tommy hesitated. "No, but. . . they'd lose their freedom. And they'd be stuck with the guy that made their lives living hell."

Puffy stayed quiet for a long, long, moment, rolling her pen between her fingers. At last she sighed. "Normally. . . I would say that the decision is completely up to them, but that's not what you're asking, huh?" At Tommy's nod, she bit her lip, tapping her pen on her chin. "If I was in that situation. . . personally, I would try to get out as fast as possible."

"So you'd work with him."

"I don't know," Puffy admitted. "It all really depends on what the person *did* to me. If I was desperate enough, I'd work with them-- but only as a last resort. I'd-- I'd try to find my own

way out first.”

Tommy nodded. “I-- okay. Yeah. That makes sense. Thanks.”

Puffy hesitated. “Tommy. . . working with someone doesn’t-- in a desperate situation, working with them doesn’t mean you have to forgive them.”

Tommy blinked. “It. . . doesn’t?”

“No. You work with them because external factors force you to. There’s no forgiveness in it.” She straightened and met his gaze with a firm, gentle stare. “I’d make it clear to him that I don’t forgive him, and that I wouldn’t take any of his bullshit. We’d both be stuck together, and if we need to work together to get out, then we’re on equal footing. He wouldn’t have any power over me.”

Tommy stared at her, mouth hanging half-open. He sat back and swallowed a few times, trying to remove the lump in his throat. “He. . . wouldn’t have any power over you.”

“He wouldn’t.”

Puffy knew the situation probably wasn’t hypothetical at all. But she also knew Tommy, knew that if she pushed, he’d just clam up and refuse to talk further. She was a therapist right now, and her main concern was helping him work through his trauma, not push him deeper into it. The best she could do was offer him some advice and wait until he trusted her enough to approach her. Though if things got out of hand. . .

Tommy knit his fingers together. “Thanks,” he said quietly. “I. . . I think I just. Realized. A lot of shit. So yeah. Thank you.”

Puffy smiled, recognizing the gratitude in his voice. “Glad I could help.” She turned back to her clipboard. “So. . . same time next week?”

“Mm.” Tommy shifted in his seat. “Wait, actually-- can we, uh, postpone? Just for a week or two? I think-- I need to figure some stuff by myself.”

Puffy nodded. “Does the 14th work? That’s in three weeks.”

“Yeah, that’s fine.” The teenager grinned at her, and though it didn’t quite reach his eyes, there was genuine warmth in it. “Thanks again, Puffy.”

“It’s no problem,” Puffy assured. She pushed herself to her feet and stretched, letting out a satisfied sigh as her back cracked. “Well, that’s it for today. Next appointment in three weeks, but feel free to drop by anytime you want, ‘kay?”

Tommy raised an eye. “Even at two in the morning?”

Puffy side-eyed him. “Emergencies only,” she declared. “A girl needs her beauty sleep.”

Tommy smirked. “Of course, Captain. Whatever you say, Captain.”

105.

The obsidian walls around him were swaying, fading in and out of focus. He braced himself for the vertigo.

It hit him like a minecart, hurling him from his body. His senses fled. For a brief moment, he felt like he was floating, suspended in nothingness. And then something *yanked*, and he jerked backward and *around*, and then he was slamming back into his own body. Only now, he was somewhere different. Somewhen different.

Loop 118.

The first thing that hit him was the heat. It was worse than a summer heatwave, an oppressive, smothering *dryness* that could only mean the presence of lava. The second thing were the sounds-- ghosts screeching in the distance, the grunts of pigmen, and someone's rasping breaths.

Dream opened his eyes. He was standing on the netherrack bridge, one hand clamped on Tommy's shoulder as they stared into the lava below. Something was humming to his right, and Dream knew that if he turned, he'd see a portal. Which meant this was--

("It's not your time to die, Tommy.")

Dream jerked back like he'd been burned, stumbling a good distance away and raising his hands to show that he was unarmed. In the same moment, Tommy threw him off and whipped around, mouth half-open in a snarl. His gaze landed on Dream, and he took a step back - right over the edge.

For a moment, Tommy teetered, one arm outstretched. Dream lunged forward, reaching for it. His fingers grazed Tommy's--

--and closed around empty air.

Tommy screamed. Dream screamed with him, unthinkingly ripping a fire resistance potion from his inventory and hurling it down at Tommy. It hit the boy in the chest and didn't break, because *it wasn't a splash potion why didn't he throw a splash--* and Tommy was *in* the lava, and oh *Prime--*

Tommy stopped screaming.

Dream sank to his knees, staring at the lava even as he tried to process the events of the past five seconds. They'd woken up in the Nether. Tommy had fallen into lava. Tommy was dead.

He took a deep breath, curling his trembling hands into fists. Everything was okay. Any moment now, the loop would restart. It always did when one of them died. The loop would restart, and Tommy would be *fine*. He just had to wait a bit longer.

A minute ticked by. Then two. Dream remained kneeling on the netherrack. He could hear his heart beating in his ears. Sweat trickled down the back of his neck. His eyes were watering. He hadn't blinked in a while.

Five minutes passed. Ten. Fifteen. And *the loop did not restart.*

Someone was giggling, quiet and half-mad. Slowly, Dream sat back, legs tingling with pins and needles. He raised his gaze to the roof of the Nether, his vision wavy with heat haze and tears. The giggling had dissolved rapid, harsh breathing.

Why wasn't the loop restarting? Was this the last one? A timeline where Tommy had died in exile?

No. He refused. This wasn't happening. Tommy wasn't dead, Tommy *couldn't* be dead permanently because Dream still needed to fix things. The loop was going to restart, it was going to be *fine*. If it didn't, he could just-- fuck, no, he couldn't even bring Tommy back because *his body was irretrievable and time hadn't restarted yet why wasn't it--?!*

"What the fuck."

"Tommy?" Dream muttered.

"I . . ." there was an uneasy pause. *"I think so? I-- fuck, I don't even know what--"*

He cut himself off with a noise of frustration. Dream slowly peeled his eyes open, squinting at the Nether roof.

"Did. . . time reset?" he croaked. "It wasn't-- It didn't-- nothing happened after you died."

Tommy leaned over him, face set in an unimpressed stare. His hair appeared to be dripping with lava, ectoplasmic droplets landing on netherrack and evaporating with a slight sizzling noise.

He was also slightly see-through. Dream blinked. "You're a ghost."

"No shit," Tommy deadpanned. He shuffled back, clearly uncomfortable. *"I . . . think I have all my memories. I remember the loops."*

"Are you. . . still Tommy?"

"I'm-- yeah. Not like-- not like Ghostbur." He frowned. *"Maybe. It's-- maybe I forgot stuff, and forgot that I forgot. Fuck, that's messed up."*

"I can bring you back. If you'll let me," he added when Tommy stiffened. "If you want me to leave you alone, I'll leave."

"I . . . no, bring me back." Tommy's eyes narrowed. *"I don't know why the loop hasn't restarted yet, but-- I can't-- I can't stay dead. If I did split from some other Tommy who's trapped in Limbo, he needs to get out."*

"Okay. Yeah. I'll just." Dream winced. "I need to be touching you to bring you back."

Tommy scowled and reluctantly held out a hand. Dream gingerly took it, fighting back the urge to recoil at the unnatural heat emanating from the ghost's skin. He closed his eyes and focused.

Instinctive panic rose up and he ruthlessly shoved it down. Quackity wasn't here. Quackity wasn't going to hurt him. He was going to revive Tommy. Quackity wouldn't see the process. *Everything was going to be okay.*

Gritting his teeth, Dream began to chant. Heavy syllables fell from his mouth, shaky but growing steadily stronger. His eyes snapped open, glowing, as the words came faster, his voice rising. Strings, visible only to him, materialized. Tommy shivered as they wrapped around his ghostly body and rubbed his neck, presumably in an attempt to remove the string he could feel wrapped around it. His fingers passed right through.

Reaching the end of his chant, Dream grabbed a fistful of the strings and *pulled*. Tommy dissolved, wisps of ectoplasm whisking away to presumably rejoin its body. Dream let out a shaky breath, rubbing his right hand.

Tommy would be respawning in Logstedshire. He should get up and check to make sure that the revival worked properly.

. . . and he would. In a few minutes. Once the unpleasant roil of emotions behind his ribs calmed a bit.

Dream laid his forehead against his knees and tried not to think about the implications of what had just happened.

Tommy was fine. This was *fine*. He was just. Confused.

So loops didn't just end when they died. Tommy had always assumed that the loops where he didn't die ended because Dream kicked the bucket, but *apparently* that wasn't the case.

When he'd died, he hadn't gone to Limbo. Oh, he'd definitely been on the way there - he had a vague recollection of hurtling into inky darkness, only for golden strings to wrap around him and yank him back. Everything had gone black, then white, and then he was rising from the lava.

Tommy took a shaky breath, mind whirling. He only had one set of memories. There was no distinction whatsoever between himself and his ghost. Was it possible that the loops were

interfering with the death process? Maybe it had kept him from going to Limbo, kept his soul whole instead of splitting it between Limbo and a ghost. But in that case, why did Ghostbur still appear in the loops? Did the get-out-of-Limbo-free card only apply to loopers?

Too many questions and not enough answers. One thing was certain, though: there were no more repercussions to dying.

He. . . wasn't sure how he felt about that.

Tommy swung his legs over the edge of the bed, only to pause when white flashed in his vision. Reaching up, he picked the lock of hair out of his eyes. His lips pulled back into a sneer and he tucked it away, brushing blonde strands over it.

Okay, so there were *some* repercussions to dying. Mental note to self: find scissors ASAP.

He pushed himself to his feet, ignoring the dull ache that flooded his body. Respawning from complete vaporization was a shit experience, but after a hundred-odd loops, it just didn't hurt as bad as it used to. Plus, he needed to leave before Dream got there. The bastard could claim he'd changed, but if he started asking questions like he had after the first revival--

("So, what was it like?")

Tommy shoved the memories into a chest, locked it with a key, and tossed both into the deepest, darkest recesses of his skull. Dream could come through the portal any second now, and he needed to be gone by then.

Mind made up, he turned inland and began the long trek to Technoblade's home.

110.

Tommy leaned back, sighing. The sweet notes of Cat floated through the air around him. He tapped his fingers on the bench as he stared into the distance,

His chest felt funny. Maybe it was nostalgia. Tubbo wasn't here, just Tommy and the disc. If he closed his eyes, he could almost pretend everything was back to normal. The normal before Schlatt, and Dream, and the loops.

Someone sat down next to him. "Hey, Tommy."

The illusion shattered. "*Big Q*," Tommy greeted, reluctantly opening his eyes. "*Hi*."

Quackity leaned back in his seat, staring at him in a way that meant he wanted to say something. Tommy rolled his eyes.

"Okay, spit it out. Why the fuck are you here?"

"What, I can't talk to my favorite ghost?"

"You're a busy man, big Q," Tommy deadpanned. "The only reason you'd come here is to find me, and you'd only find me if you wanted something. So what is it?"

Quackity sighed. "That obvious, huh?"

Tommy waited for him to continue. He didn't. ". . . So?"

Quackity grimaced and turned away, staring at the horizon. "It's. . . I'm not sure how to say it--"

"Just say it," Tommy groaned. "I'm not fuckin' fragile, I don't need sugarcoating."

"Right, right." Quackity took a deep breath. "Tommy, do you want to be alive again?"

Tommy stared at him. His death this time around had been an honest accident - he'd frozen when he'd seen a creeper. The explosion had sent him into a panic attack, which (when compounded with how he'd fallen and impaled himself on his shattered armor) was pretty much fatal. He just couldn't be bothered to drag himself to see Dream after that fiasco.

Being a ghost wasn't too bad anyway - he could go through walls and shit, and jumpscare Ranboo. (Though the poor guy had started crying the third time he did it, so Tommy stopped.)

Now Quackity was asking if he wanted to be revived.

He shrugged, turning towards the view. *"I dunno, big Q. It's peaceful. No more worrying."*

Quackity's breathing hitched slightly before it evened out again. "Huh," he said. "Not boring?"

"Maybe a little," Tommy admitted. "But it's better than fighting all the time."

Quackity shifted uncomfortably, then huffed. ". . . How's Tubbo holding up?"

"He's sad," Tommy said. "But he'll be okay."

Another long silence. Quackity clasped his hands together and sat forward, foot tapping.

". . . Are you sure you don't want to be revived?"

Tommy shrugged. *"I mean, I don't really care."* He peered at Quackity. *"Why're you asking?"*

"I might be able to revive you."

"I thought Dream was the only one."

Something dark flashed across Quackity's face. "He is, but I can convince him to revive you."

Tommy stared at Quackity. Quackity didn't meet his gaze.

“Why do you want me to come back so bad?”

Quackity shrugged. “I . . . just do.”

Tommy knew a nonanswer when he heard it. But. . . he trusted Quackity. He was one of the few who had still cared about Tommy up until the end. There was probably a good reason for why the man was being so dodgy.

Being a ghost was getting kinda boring, anyway. And with Quackity there, he didn’t need to worry about struggling through another painful conversation with Dream. So. . . *“Okay.”*

Quackity beamed. “Cool, cool. Let’s head to the prison, then. Don’t worry about Dream, he won’t try anything with me there.”

He rose from the bench and held out a hand. Without hesitation, Tommy took it.

Something was wrong.

Sam had let them into the prison without question. He skipped the security checks and took them straight through the guards’ corridor, which-- wasn’t like him at all. The Warden took his job seriously; he made everyone go through the checks, even those that seemed harmless. And neither Quackity nor Tommy seemed harmless.

Tommy narrowed his eyes at the Warden’s back, only to don a neutral expression when Sam’s gaze flicked his way. The creeper hybrid had been doing that a lot. Probably upset that Tommy died.

Maybe that was why he was rushing the security checks. But even if he was eager to get Tommy revived, he wouldn’t rush the process. Sam prioritized being a warden above all else-- he’d proved that when he let Tommy die.

Something was happening here. Something Tommy didn’t know about. He didn’t like that.

As they stepped onto the platform, Quackity pulled out a pair of shears. Odd weapon choice, but Sam didn’t seem too put off by it, so Tommy didn’t comment. Then they were moving, and Tommy was too busy fighting off panic to care about anything else.

It was a shitty trauma response, something that happened whenever he was standing on this platform. He had to remind himself that it was fine. He’d visited here as a ghost before. It would be the same as always. In and out, and then he’d be alive again. He was going to be okay. Quackity was here to protect him. Tommy was already dead. Dream couldn’t hurt him.

He took a deep breath, his incorporeal lungs burning with the heat. Quackity sent him a side glance, then looked away when the platform reached the other side.

The smell hit him first. Tommy recoiled at the familiar, sickening-sweet scent of blood mixed with potions of regeneration. His eyes darted wildly, searching for the source, only to land on several suspicious splatters covering the walls and floor. Most of it was faded; the porous obsidian absorbed any sort of fluid.

Dream was huddled in the back corner of the cell, squished between the lectern and the wall. He didn't move as Quackity and Tommy stepped off the platform.

"Hello, Dream."

Dream raised his head, exhaustion clear in every line of his face. He opened his mouth to speak, only to freeze when he noticed Tommy. Tommy flinched and shuffled backwards.

Quackity stepped between them. "This isn't a usual visit. We've got a guest today, so I'll make it quick--" he pointed at Tommy. "Revive him."

Dream's mouth opened and closed. His gaze darted wildly between the ghost and the man. "I-I can't," he croaked. "Not with-- not with you here."

Tommy couldn't see Quackity's expression. He *did* see, however, the way Quackity adjusted his grip on the shears.

Dream's skin paled to paper-white. "I can't," he protested.

"I wasn't asking, Dream," Quackity said softly. He took a step forward. Dream shrank back.

Something was very, *very* wrong here. Every alarm bell was going off in Tommy's head. Unbidden, snippets of a past conversation rose in his mind.

("What do you call the shit that happened in prison then?")

"Revive him," Quackity repeated.

"I *can* 't, please, you'll know, you'll *hear*--"

"You're not the one in charge, Dream," Quackity snarled. He stalked forward and grabbed Dream by the front of his jumpsuit, hoisting him to his feet. "Didn't you want to do this? Keep the only 'interesting' person on the server alive? You did it before. Do it again, or I'll kill you."

"You'll kill me anyway," Dream choked out. "You'll figure out how to revive people and then--"

Quackity's face went terrifyingly blank. "Fine then," he said. "Revive Tommy, or you'll *wish* I killed you."

Tommy stared at them. Stared at the resigned terror on Dream's face, his shaking hands, the way he curled away from Quackity as though he expected--

Like puzzle pieces clicking together, everything fell into place.

The blood seeping into the walls.

The blood splattered on Dream's jumpsuit.

The blood drying on Quackity's shears.

And most damningly, the nauseating smell of Regeneration.

("What do you call the shit that happened in prison then?"

"If I recall correctly, you weren't the one that got beaten to death."

". . . That's not what I was talking about.")

Fuck. *Fuck. Fuck shit shit shit--*

"B-big Q?"

Quackity blinked, like he'd forgotten Tommy was there. A smile slid onto his face. It didn't reach his eyes. "Don't worry, Tommy. You'll be alive again in no time."

Dream made a noise high in the back of his throat, wild and half-hysterical. "Fine," he breathed, slumping forward. Something almost like *surprise* flashed across Quackity's face. "Fine. Whatever. It doesn't matter. T-Tommy, you-- come here."

Tommy remained rooted in place.

"Come here," Quackity said. Tommy's eyes strayed to his free hand, which was clamped around Dream's shoulder. "Come on, Tommy. Don't you want to be alive again?"

"Big Q. Quackity," Tommy rasped. His voice shook. *"What. . ."*

"Dream was just being stubborn, that's all." Quackity's voice hardened. "Now *come here.*"

Tommy's drifted forward, mind still reeling. Dream held out a hand when he neared, only to flinch.

"I need to be touching him," he said.

"Don't try anything funny," Quackity warned. Dream nodded, shifting his hand a bit closer to Tommy. An invitation.

Tommy stared at it. *"I don't. . . I'm not sure about this."*

"Come on," Quackity coaxed. His eyes were fixed on Tommy. "Take his hand."

Tommy's hand moved on autopilot, dropping into Dream's. The man let out a shaky breath, eyes sliding shut. He began to chant, monotone syllables dropping from cracked lips. Tommy inhaled at the familiar sensation of *strings* wrapping around him.

Dream's voice rose. The strings *pulled*.

The last thing Tommy saw was Quackity's smile.

Tommy shot up, gasping. He slammed a fist into his chest as his lungs and heart began functioning again. Fuck, he hated this part of the revival process.

He waited until his shivering died down, getting used to the feeling of blood in his veins. A quick glance around revealed that he was in his house, the last place he'd set his spawn before he died.

There was nobody else around him. He was alone. Tommy let himself curl into a ball, fisting his trembling hands in his hair.

Okay. Shit. *Shit*. Think, but not all at once. What had Puffy said? Right, create a list. Creating a list would help him process things better. He started with the small things, like Puffy had taught him to.

One: he was alive. His body was in working order, as always, but he'd have to get used to being corporeal again.

Two: Dream had revived him, again. Except this time, Quackity had been the one to initiate it.

Three: Quackity was looking for information on the revival process. Information that only *Dream* had, information that Dream refused to share.

Four: Quackity was using him. Had used him. Had used his fucking *ghost* so he could get his hands on the revival process.

Five: It had been nearly a month since Tommy had died. Using his ghost had been Quackity's last resort.

Six: Quackity's first resort was torturing Dream for the revival book.

Seven: Dream had been in prison for nearly two and half years by now. Had Quackity been--visiting him the entire time?

Eight: (*"This isn't a usual visit."*)

Yes, he had been visiting him the entire time.

Nine: neither he nor Dream had done anything drastic this time around, which meant that this had happened in Loop Zero too.

Ten: He *remembered* things. Things that suddenly had a second meaning.

Technoblade astride a horse at full gallop, racing away from the prison, an unconscious Dream slumped in his arms. Punz betraying them in the final fight, going straight for Quackity's back.

Dream, frantic and trying not to blurt out the secrets of resurrection. Quackity, his eyes shining with hunger when he looked at Tommy's ghost.

His mind was a whirlpool of confusion and horror. Quackity was after the revival book. Quackity used Tommy so he could see the revival process. Quackity tortured Dream. Sam had been helping Quackity--

He recoiled at the thought. But no, it made sense-- why else would the security checks go by so quickly? There were cameras in the cell, Sam *had* to know what had been happening. Dream had been suffering and nobody else had known in the original timeline, because Sam locked down the prison after Tommy left and *nobody could visit*. Nobody except Quackity. And every time they looped back--

--and every time they looped back--

Tommy scrambled off of his bed and collapsed on all fours, dry heaving. He could taste copper and ghost tears in the back of his throat.

Fuck this. Fuck this. *Fuck this*. Dream hurt him. Dream deserved it. Dream *deserved--*

(--clawing at obsidian walls, hands batted aside so easily, screaming, screaming, somebody please help me save me get me out away from this madman please stop please I don't want to die--)

Tommy pressed his forehead against the dirt floor. He could remember it, clear as day. Dream looming over him with bloodied fists and jagged grin, the lava behind him casting him in burning red.

(--human bodies, so fragile, skulls cracking and caving beneath knuckles--)

It was all too easy to imagine Quackity in his place. Only instead of bloodied fists, bloodied *shears--*

(--sharp metal cutting into flesh and bone, carving--)

Tommy snarled, hunching over. He didn't want to think about it. Didn't *need* to think about it. Dream hurt him, got hurt in return-- it was karma. Simple. Easy. Dream deserved it for what he did.

(--fragile joints shattered like glass--)

Dream deserved it. He *did*--

(“Revive Tommy, or you’ll **wish** I killed you.”)

“SHUT UP!” Tommy howled, slamming a fist into the ground. “JUST FUCKING SHUT UP! STOP IT! STOP IT! HE HURT ME! HE KILLED ME! HE DESTROYED MY HOME! HE’S AN ABSOLUTE BASTARD AND HE DES--”

He choked on the word.

Because Dream didn’t deserve it. *Nobody* deserved it. He knew firsthand the terror of being trapped, unable to escape from the pain, knowing there was someone *out there* who *knew* what was happening yet chose not to help.

Dream had abused Tommy. Dream had been tortured. And then he’d suffered the same thing, over, and over, and over.

What was Tommy supposed to feel?

A hoarse, mirthless laugh tore its way out of his chest. Once he started, he couldn’t stop. He kept laughing, and laughing, even as his eyes burned.

They were over a hundred and fifty loops in. How many times had Dream looped into the prison? How many times had Dream woken up with Quackity standing over him? How *long* had Dream spent bleeding and bleeding and--

“Tommy?”

Ranboo was standing in the doorway. A bundle of alliums lay at his feet. The sun was at his back, casting his face in deep shadow, but Tommy could hear the sizzling of water against skin.

Tommy tried to speak, but another cackle threatened to burst from his chest. He bit down on his tongue until he tasted iron.

“Tommy,” Ranboo gasped, and when Tommy blinked, he was *there*, a foot away, hands reaching out and hovering like he was scared to touch him. “Tommy, you’re-- *you’re alive.*”

That’s right. He was alive. Again. Everything ached. His skin felt too tight, too stiff. His chest was a mess of confusion and vindication and guilt. His head was too loud. He was being torn to pieces. He needed--he needed something, someone, anything--

Tommy reached out and grabbed Ranboo, pulling him down to his level, hands curling in the lapels of his suit. Ranboo yelped, but Tommy was already falling forward, pressing his face into the fabric.

“Oh,” Ranboo said, and then, “*Tommy,*” and arms circled around him, thin and bony and the best fucking thing he’d felt in ten loops.

He was safe. Ranboo would keep him together.

Tommy collapsed into the hug and let himself fall apart.

120.

“Yeah, well-- remember-- remember the guy we’ve been talking about? The-- the one who hurt me?”

“Yes.”

Tommy licked his lips. “Um. I, uh, I learned something. Something. Bad. He’s not doing anything to me,” he added when Puffy’s face darkened. “It was. Uh. He was, I think he was-- tortured?”

The words hung in the uneasy silence. Puffy adjusted her grip on the clipboard. “I . . . see. And how does that make you feel?”

Tommy gritted his teeth. “See, he was-- hurt ‘cause this other guy. Wanted information about something he knew. But um, I *knew* the other guy, he was always real nice to me and I think-- I think he was uh, upset, about the-- the stuff *he* did, right, to me and everyone else, and *he* suffered for a really long time-- and that was part of why he hurt him. Thing was, nobody *knew* it was happening-- and like, yeah, he hurt me, but he got hurt too, so. . .”

Puffy set her clipboard down. "Tommy. He was hurt, yes. But that doesn't mean it was okay for him to hurt you."

Tommy knit his hands together and didn't look up. "You didn't see 'im," he muttered. "You didn't see what. . . what they did to him. He-- he was the absolute worst, but-- he didn't. . . I don't think he deserved to be tortured."

"Nobody does," Puffy said gently. "What they did to him was wrong, but what he did to you was also wrong. Trauma doesn't absolve someone of their crimes."

Tommy scrubbed a hand through his hair. "No, I-- I get that-- I do-- It's just-- he's suffered enough, hasn't he? He paid for what he did and now all I need to do is forgive him but my stupid fucking brain--"

“Tommy.”

Tommy stilled.

Puffy’s eyes softened. She set her clipboard down. “Tommy, forgiveness-- it doesn’t work like that. Suffering isn’t equivalent exchange. He hurt you. Someone else hurt him. Those two *don’t cancel each other out*.”

Tommy gnawed on the inside of his cheek. “But. . .”

“Think of it this way. Let’s say, hmm, you know Foolish, right?” At Tommy’s nod, she continued. “He’s one of my closest friends, and I care a lot about him. Then let’s say Bad killed Foolish.”

Tommy blinked. “That-- what the fuck--”

“It’s just an analogy,” Puffy assured. “So let’s say Bad killed Foolish. I’d be mad, wouldn’t I?”

“I’d say a bit more than ‘mad’,” Tommy deadpanned.

“I . . . yeah, that’s true, I’d be out for his blood. But then let’s say. . . let’s say someone else killed Skeppy because they were upset that Bad killed Foolish.” Puffy grimaced. “You do know how Bad and Skeppy--”

“Yeah, yeah, they’re like fuckin’ best friends for life or some shit,” Tommy muttered. “What’s the point?”

“Well, if someone killed Skeppy as revenge for Bad killing Foolish, do you think I’d forgive Bad?”

“No?” Tommy scoffed. “That’s-- those are two completely different things. . . oh. *Oh.*”

“Maybe Bad would feel sorry,” Puffy said. “And maybe we’d be able to understand each other better - but just because he went through the same pain I did doesn’t mean I’d forgive him.”

“I get that,” Tommy admitted. “I . . . I do. But-- ugh--”

Puffy waited patiently as he got his thoughts in order. At last Tommy huffed, twisting his hands together and falling back into the chair.

“I just. . . I feel like he’s been hurt enough. He doesn’t need more.”

“But do you feel ready to forgive him?”

“. . . No,” Tommy whispered.

“And that’s okay,” Puffy said. “That’s perfectly okay, Tommy. You don’t have to forgive him.”

“But if I don’t forgive him, won’t that just hurt him more?”

Puffy hummed. “How about this? Take him to someone who can help him recover. He’s been hurt. Help him hurt less. You don’t have to forgive him, but you can help him hurt less.”

Tommy stared at her. “. . . You’re right,” he muttered. “You’re-- yeah, no, I can-- I can do that.”

Puffy frowned. "I'm not trying to pressure you to do anything. If you don't feel comfortable with the idea--"

"But I'd feel even shittier if I didn't do anything," Tommy told her. "It's. . . really, it's a good idea. Thank you."

Puffy studied him for a moment longer, then smiled. "I'm glad I could help. If you need something, just let me know."

"A nice, hot cup of mental stability would be nice."

Puffy barked out a surprise laugh. "I don't think it works like that, but I wish it did." She twirled her pen. "So, same time next week?"

Stepping out into the crisp winter air, Tommy tilted his head back and watched as his breath left his mouth in icy white puffs. The wind swept them northward, in the direction of Pandora' Vault.

He didn't have to forgive Dream. He wasn't planning to anytime soon. But he could help Dream recover. And to do that, he'd have to do one of two things - either stop Quackity, or break Dream out of his inescapable prison.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and buried a sardonic smile in his scarf.

Looks like he had his work cut out for him.

130.

Tommy opened his eyes to see Dream.

They were sitting on opposite ends of the cell. Dream stiffened when he realized where he was, gaze jolting up to meet Tommy's. He hastily looked away, picking at his fingernails.

Well. This wasn't the most ideal place to talk, but Tommy wasn't going to waste another loop trying to find Dream. It was either now or never-- well, not never, more like *much later*.

He shoved those thoughts aside and cleared his throat. Dream went still, gaze fixed on the obsidian floor.

"Dream."

". . . Hey," Dream rasped. He didn't look up.

“I’ve been. . . thinking,” Tommy started, “that uh, maybe we could give this-- this whole working together shit a try.”

Dream stilled, raising his head to shoot Tommy a bewildered look.

“This doesn’t mean I forgive you,” Tommy added hastily. “This isn’t-- you’re not the one in charge here. The only reason I’m agreeing is because I don’t want to be stuck in this fuckin’ time loop forever.”

“Aren’t you scared?” Dream asked.

Tommy hesitated. He was tempted to bluster, to claim that he wasn’t scared of Dream anymore, to tell the man that he held no power over him. But a little voice in the back of his head (that sounded suspiciously like Puffy) reminded him that sometimes, brutal honesty held far more weight than obvious bluffing.

“I’m fucking terrified,” Tommy admitted. Dream jerked back, his eyes widening. “I don’t think you’re a better person now, that’s-- that’s bullshit. You’re probably just plotting to backstab me or some shit, but--” he gritted his teeth, narrowing his eyes. “I know the signs now, Dream. Don’t try anything, or the deal gets called off.”

Dream was silent for several long seconds. Tommy swallowed, watching as unreadable microexpressions flickered across his face. At last he dipped his head. “That’s. . . reasonable.”

Tommy’s palms were sweating. He wiped them on his pants, shoving down the fear roiling in his stomach. “Okay,” he said. “If we’re gonna work together, we gotta set some rules.”

Dream shrugged, though the action was stiff. “What are they?”

Tommy scowled, tucking his shaking hands between his knees. It was. . . really fucking weird, seeing Dream like this. It was like his entire personality had been overwritten or some shit. The entire thing gave him the creeps.

“No lies. We need to *talk* shit out if we’re actually going to work together.”

“Alright.”

“No killing, either.” Tommy glared at him. “Directly or indirectly. If you kill someone, I’m quitting.”

Dream laced his fingers together and *pulled*, his knuckles straining white. He didn’t look up at Tommy. “. . . What about for self defense?”

Tommy breathed through his instinct to snap a denial, forcing himself to take a step back and *look* at the situation. The way things were going, they’d be looping into the post-final-confrontation era several more times before they could get a solid strategy to consistently break Dream out. That meant that Dream would likely be forced to face Quackity a few more times. And Tommy, as much as he hated Dream, didn’t want him to. . . go through that.

“Not their final life,” he ground out.

Dream’s head jerked up and down in a nod. “I can do that. But.” He looked to the side. “If I-- kill someone. . . if I kill someone, *permanently*, I’ll bring them back. With. With the book.”

Tommy’s nerves went alight. He was faintly aware of his pulse thundering in his ears, staccato-sharp, and the ache growing in his chest. Memories of that fucking *void* cycled through his mind, pressing in on him and eating away at his very being until he had nothing. Memories of *being* nothing, until chartreuse strings split the darkness and dragged him into the realm of the living.

“Yeah,” he forced out through clenched teeth. His voice cracked. “You. Do that.”

Dream looked. . . for lack of a better word, very uncomfortable. Served the bastard right.

Tommy forced himself to breathe, cycling through his exercises until his heartbeat slowed to a reasonable pace. He relaxed his muscles, one by one, before finally looking back at Dream.

“Last one-- and fuck if I know you’re gonna break it-- respect my fucking boundaries.” Tommy scowled halfheartedly, feeling inexplicably *tired*. “I’m a human being, Dream, and you’re gonna treat me like one.”

Dream swallowed. “I. . . Of course.”

“And. . . these rules go for you too,” Tommy grumbled. Dream blinked in surprise. “I’ll respect your boundaries if you respect mine.”

“O. . . kay?”

“Right.” Tommy turned his glare on the wall of lava. “Well, when I get out, I’ll start figuring out a way to break you out. We can’t work together if you’re stuck in here half the time.”

Dream’s breathing hitched. Tommy glanced at him to see that he’d gone stock-still, gaze boring into the floor. “You. . .” he started, his voice trembling. He cleared his throat. “You’re going to. To break me out?”

“Well, I’m gonna damn well try,” Tommy scoffed. “It’ll take us a few loops to figure it out, but we have time.”

“Right,” Dream murmured. He returned to picking at his hands.

Tommy gnawed on the inside of his cheek. His suspicions were almost all but confirmed, but he still needed to know. Still needed to *know* that it had really happened.

“Dream.” The man in question tensed. “Did. . . was Quackity hurting you?”

Dream paused, completely still for three long seconds. Then his head snapped up. “You didn’t know?”

Tommy recoiled. “What the fuck?! No! Quackity did all that shit by himself!”

Dream *stared* at him. His next words scraped off his tongue like shards of broken glass. “You. . . didn’t know.”

Tommy gritted his teeth. “Dream, I don’t condone torture.” *Unlike you*, went unsaid.

“You didn’t know,” the other man repeated. “He-- all this time, he said-- I thought--”

“Well you thought wrong,” Tommy scoffed.

Dream sat forward, a desperate light shining in his eyes. Tommy tensed. “Sorry, just. . . did, did the others know?”

“No? I told you, Quackity was acting on his own.”

Dream smiled. It was jagged at the edges and half-delirious, born from the mad joy that came with a giddy realization at rock bottom. Tommy instinctively drew back at the sight of it, but Dream didn’t even seem to notice.

“They didn’t know,” he breathed, curling inwards as he dug his fingers into his matted hair. “They-- *they didn’t know*, they didn’t tell him to do it.” His smile widened even as tears began trickling down his cheeks. “Ha, they-- it was just-- him, they didn’t-- ha-- haha--”

“Dream?” Tommy shifted. The rough obsidian scraped across his back. “Dream, you’re, uh, being weird.”

Dream’s eyes snapped to him. “They *didn’t know*,” he choked out. “They didn’t tell him to do it, they didn’t tell him I *deserved* it, it was all him-- I thought, I thought George or Sapnap *knew*, and they didn’t-- they just didn’t--”

Oh.

Oh.

“They don’t know,” Tommy blurted. “They didn’t. Nobody did.”

Dream hunched in on himself, burying his face in his knees. It did nothing to stop the unsettling laughter spilling past his lips. Tommy shrank back against the wall of the cell, digging his nails into his knees to ground himself. He bit on the inside of his cheek and followed his breathing exercises, trying to ignore the madman giggling hysterically on the other side of the cell.

When Dream had finally fallen silent, Tommy cleared his throat. “So.”

“So,” Dream echoed. His voice was hoarse. Tommy glanced at the blinking red light in the corner of the ceiling so he didn’t have to look at him.

“Sam. . . does Sam have microphones in here?”

Dream didn’t comment on the subject change. It was an unspoken agreement to pretend that the last five minutes hadn’t happened. “No.”

“Great. Okay. So, breaking you out of jail.” Tommy curled and uncurled his hands, taking a deep breath. “Tell me how Techno did it, and we can go from there.”

155.

Tommy stumbled as powdery snow crunched beneath his next step. Shaking off the usual start-of-loop disorientation, he surveyed the area. He appeared to be in a spruce forest, walking steadily in one direction. The sky had been smothered in a thick layer of clouds, leaving a chill in the air that stung at his exposed fingertips. Directly in front of him, another figure marched along, her pink hair tied back in a ponytail.

Tommy narrowed his eyes at Niki’s back. He’d begun to suspect that she hated him at this point in the timeline, but because she hadn’t ever said or showed it outright, he couldn’t be sure. From what he could remember, this was the day when she’d offered to help him gather spruce - and the day he’d gotten radiation poisoning. Better to avoid the nuke crater, then, or at least grab a suit before he headed in.

In the meantime, he could test the waters. See if she really was mad at him. He hadn’t interacted enough with her later in the timeline to get a concrete idea, so this was a golden opportunity.

“So, Niki,” he began, noting how her shoulders hiked up. “Are you, uh. . . okay?”

Niki didn’t turn around. “Fine,” she snapped, speeding up. Tommy winced at her tone. He’d been pretty miffed by Sam Nook’s demands that day, and he’d partially taken it out on her - amping his obnoxious act up a few levels and ignoring her discomfort. It was still pretty jarring, though, to end one loop on good terms with Niki only to be dropped into this one.

“You sure? You sound a little, uh. . .”

“I’m *fine*,” Niki insisted, then took a deep breath. When she spoke again, her voice no longer strained on the edge of a shout. “Really, Tommy. It’s just, uh, the cold.”

“Oh. You want a jacket?”

“No, thank you.”

They walked in silence for another minute. Tommy glanced at the corpses of spruce they passed, but didn’t attempt to chop any of them down. Something had begun gnawing at the back of his mind, a warning. A premonition. Tommy trusted his instincts, but he needed to see this through to the end.

When the quiet stretched on for a moment too long, Tommy scrambled for the first conversation topic that came to mind. “So. . . seen any women lately?” Not the greatest conversation topic for a conversation with Niki. Oops. “Uh, not that-- I mean, uh, besides you, Niki. You’re a woman too, yes. But like--”

“Prime, just shut up,” Niki growled under her breath, and Tommy stopped in his tracks. Niki stopped too, as though suddenly realizing she’d said something she shouldn’t have.

“Niki. . .?”

Niki remained silent, fingers curling and uncurling like she was debating whether or not to wring his neck. At last she sighed, long and low, and turned to face him.

Tommy found himself recoiling at the sheer *hatred* burning in her eyes. Her previous smile was nowhere to be seen, replaced with a scowl sharp enough to cut.

“I said, *shut up*. ”

Tommy felt like the air had been knocked from his lungs. A distant part of his brain noted that at least he could confirm that she hated him now, but knowing it and *facing* it were two entirely different things. “N-Niki--”

Niki *exploded*. “I HATE YOU!” she screamed. “I *HATE YOU!* YOU’RE SO SELFISH AND STUPID AND YOU JUST DO WHATEVER YOU WANT TO AND YOU NEVER THINK ABOUT THE CONSEQUENCES! YOU USE PEOPLE AND THROW THEM AWAY WHEN YOU DON’T NEED THEM ANYMORE! YOU LEFT ME IN MANBERG, LEFT ME WITH SCHLATT WHEN YOU *KNEW* WHAT HE WOULD DO TO ME!”

“Niki--”

“SHUT UP!”

Tommy shut up.

“You started so many conflicts,” she hissed, furious tears welling up in her eyes. “All because you couldn’t let go of two *stupid fucking discs*. How many people suffered for your petty power struggles? How many people *died?!* ”

Her last words rang out against the snow-laden branches. She glared at him, panting with the exertion of her words, waiting for an answer-- but Tommy couldn’t give her one. Couldn’t speak. Couldn’t move.

What could he say to that? He knew now that Niki hated him, but her *reasons*-- had she always felt like that? Had those been the thoughts cycling through her mind every time she looked at him, talked to him, smiled at him? Had this been how she felt since Manberg, when he and Wilbur had left her behind? Were her accusations fair? Had he abandoned her? Was he selfish? Was he responsible for the unending conflict on the server?

The heavy silence hanging between them was interrupted by the distant drone of a fast-approaching object. Tommy managed to recollect himself just enough to look up, spurred on by the realization that *they were too early*. Already he could see the shadow through the clouds, a black speck growing steadily larger.

“N-Niki,” he croaked. “I’m--” *sorry*, he didn’t say, because that didn’t even *begin* to cover what he was feeling. He needed more time to reflect, to *think* about her words and his actions.

So instead he focused on the more immediate issue. “We have to go. We have to go *now*.”

Niki threw her head back and *laughed*, loud and angry and more than a little tear-crazed because she knew he knew he was avoiding the issue but Tommy couldn’t *think* about it right now. So he staggered to her and shoved her in the direction of the path, ignoring how his heartbeat pounded in his ears. “Niki, run! RUN!”

Niki was openly sobbing now, her legs folding under her. Tommy tried to drag her away, but she was practically deadweight in his arms. He wouldn’t be able to get out of blast range fast enough to get her out, but abandoning her was *not an option*.

“Niki, please,” he begged. It was useless.

Overhead, the clouds parted. Sunlight glinted off the silver shell of the nuke as it descended from the sky. Tommy stared up at it, entranced, right before déjà vu rammed into him like a minecart. He’d been here before, staring up at a nuclear bomb. He’d been in this exact position at the final--

The world went white, and Tommy knew no more.

165.

Tommy awoke in a burst of bloodied ash. Shaking cinders from his hair, he squinted at his surroundings through the murky air. Strangely enough, the soot-choked haze didn’t irritate his lungs, and he paused to marvel at it - only to realize that he wasn’t breathing.

A quick glance at his hands confirmed his suspicions: he was a ghost.

Even as this realization dawned on him, the shock numbing his mind began to fade a way. One by one, his memories filed into consciousness - following Niki to gather spruce, Niki screaming at him, and. . . nuke.

Well. At least he knew Niki hated him now. And had hated him for a while. And might have also arranged his death.

He cringed as her face flashed in his mind, wild-eyed and twisted with hate. Shoving that aside for later consideration, he turned his attention to his final moments. The nuke had reminded him of something. Had he been nuked in a past loop? Loop zero? He tried to recall the end of the original timeline, but it fled from his mind every time he got a clear lock on it. Now that he thought about it, his recollection of the final battle itself was pretty fuzzy - he vaguely recalled the meeting leading up to it and the tense hours spent pacing back and forth, but the actual fight was a blur of whirling blades and terror. The clearest thing he could remember was the sting of betrayal when Punz stabbed Quackity in the back. How had the battle ended? Had Tubbo dropped a nuke on the battlefield? It made no sense, but Tubbo was the only one on the server who had nukes - and why else would Tommy feel such déjà vu?

“T-Tommy?”

Tommy snapped out of his contemplation, turning to see Tubbo and Jack. Both were dressed in hazmat suits, and Tommy realized that they must be in the crater. A quick glance around showed a lump on the ground that might be his corpse.

"Oh," he said, and was faintly surprised when his voice echoed. *"Uh. Hi. Is Niki okay?"*

"Tommy," Tubbo repeated, taking a step back. "You-- you're-- dead?"

"Um," said Tommy, because telling Tubbo he'd been hit by the nuke would be a very bad idea. He had to get revived as quickly as possible. *"Where's Niki? I think-- I think she was with me, when. When I. Uh."*

A glance at Jack showed that he had a strange expression plastered across his face, something between joy, grief, and guilt. So Jack *had* been in on the plot to kill him. Tommy shuffled that realization away before he could think too hard about it. The mental breakdown could wait until he was alone.

Tubbo's voice dragged him out of his thoughts. "You. . . you're not dead, are you? You didn't. . . there's no way the nuke hit you." The teenager smiled, heartbreakingly hopeful. "No, it couldn't have. Right? Your house is miles away."

Tommy floundered, unsure of whether to expose his murderers or let Tubbo sink deeper into denial. He didn't want Tubbo to start blaming himself, but he also didn't want Tubbo to go on a revenge arc and destroy half the server in an attempt to kill Jack and Niki. *"I . . . dunno?"*

Tubbo stared at him. "You don't know if you're dead."

Tommy shrugged, already backing away. *"Y-yeah. Listen, I-- I gotta go. There's some shit I need to take care of, big man things to do-- I'll be back, okay? I'll talk to you soon, I just-- I need to deal with this."*

He sunk through the bottom of the crater before Tubbo could ask any more questions. Let Jack clean up his own mess - Tommy had some self-reflection to do.

Tommy settled against the cave wall, allowing the rough stone to press into his back. He glared at a creeper that had gotten a little too far into his personal space, drawn by his ghostly glow. The creeper hissed and scuttled away. Tommy resisted the urge to flip it off, instead closing his eyes and bracing himself. Puffy's voice echoed in the back of his mind.

"Breathe. Stay grounded. Be open to admitting when you're wrong, but recognize when you were in the right."

Tommy breathed. Tommy grounded himself. Tommy considered what Niki had said.

“YOU’RE SO SELFISH AND STUPID AND YOU JUST DO WHATEVER YOU WANT TO AND YOU NEVER THINK ABOUT THE CONSEQUENCES! YOU USE PEOPLE AND THROW THEM AWAY WHEN YOU DON’T NEED THEM ANYMORE! YOU LEFT ME IN MANBERG, LEFT ME WITH SCHLATT WHEN YOU KNEW WHAT HE WOULD DO TO ME!”

“You started so many conflicts, all because you couldn’t let go of two stupid fucking discs. How many people suffered for your petty power struggles? How many people died?!”

It was tempting to blame himself. To take Niki’s accusations to heart and fall into self-loathing. But Tommy hadn’t lived through countless years of war, hadn’t gone through several recovery arcs, hadn’t scheduled so many sessions with Puffy - just to forget everything he’d learned. So instead he wrangled his thoughts into submission and looked, *really* looked, at the accusations.

First things first. Abandoning her in L’Manberg. That was. . . true, to some extent. In Pogtopia, neither he nor Wilbur had ever considered contacting her or checking how she was doing. Given that both Fundy and Tubbo had been recruited into the Schlatt administration, she must have felt hurt and betrayed and alone. From what Tommy could recall, Schlatt had targeted her, taxing her to the point where she nearly had to close her bakery. It was understandable that she’d wished to be in Pogtopia instead.

At the same time. . . Niki could have left Manberg, could’ve messaged Tommy or Wilbur for Pogtopia’s coordinates and joined them. After all, if *Tubbo* could sneak out of Manberg, why couldn’t she? Yes, both he and Wilbur had left her behind in their mad dash from Manberg-- but their *lives* had been on the line, and they’d left Fundy and Tubbo behind as well.

And even if they had taken Niki. . . it likely wouldn’t have been the way she envisioned. (Unless her joining *did* change something-- would Niki’s presence prevent Wilbur from descending into madness? He shook off that line of thought and stowed it away for later.) Point was, Pogtopia hadn’t been *the greatest* experience of Tommy’s life. Nowhere near as bad as Exile, but-- well. He still had nightmares sometimes.

Then there were the discs. He’d given them up so L’Manberg could have independence, and he’d spent a lot of time trying to get them back - but that conflict hadn’t really involved anyone except him and Dream. Yeah, Tubbo got dragged in at the end of it - but most of the wars were centered around L’Manberg, not the discs.

That being said, Tommy had to admit that his actions had been a pretty big catalyst for a lot of the events on the server. Antagonizing Dream had been a bad idea from the start, and *yeah*, he’d been a teenager, but that didn’t excuse the role he’d played in turning the server into a bloody warzone. Kids on Earth-adjacent servers didn’t walk away from jail time just because they were kids. He’d broken Dream’s rules, purposefully provoked him again and again. Without his presence, the server would be very different from what it was today.

However, he wasn’t the only one at fault - nearly everyone had a part to play in the conflict that followed. He and Dream had certainly had a bigger role in it than others, but Wilbur, Schlatt - heck, even *Technoblade* - had their fair share of blame. The only difference was that some people faced consequences.

Niki had been hurt, and she'd responded like everyone else on the server - by lashing out at the convenient scapegoat. Schlatt and Wilbur were dead, Dream was inaccessible. . . and so she'd focused her rage on Tommy.

Tommy knew that at the very least, he owed her an apology - even an explanation, if she'd be willing to listen to it. But he didn't think he deserved to be murdered. At the very least, Tubbo didn't deserve to live with the guilt (because Tubbo *would* blame himself, idiot that he was).

Unfortunately, Tommy also knew that he needed to talk to Jack. While Niki's motives for killing him were clear, Jack's were essentially one giant question mark. Tommy wasn't quite sure why Jack hated him, but if this loop had taught him anything, the best way to find out would be to ask upfront - and this was a golden opportunity to do it. So he'd have to get it over with as quickly as possible, then get revived and head to Snowchester to before Tubbo did something drastic. Like blowing half the server into oblivion.

With a put-upon sigh, Tommy heaved himself off the floor and set off in search of Jack.

175.

"What are *you* doing here?"

Tommy refused to falter in the face of hostility, forcing himself to remain relaxed as he lounged on Jack's couch. "*Guess why, bitch.*"

Jack snorted. "So you've come back to haunt me. Figures."

"*I'm not here to haunt you,*" Tommy said. "*I just want to know why you killed me.*"

There was a beat of silence. Then Jack scoffed. "Right, ghost. You forgot, didn't you?"

Tommy frowned. ". . . *No? I have all of my memories--*"

"If you did, you wouldn't be asking." Jack turned away, clearly dismissing him. "Now get out of my house, I have shit to do."

Tommy obviously couldn't let that stand. He got to his feet and hurried after Jack, trailing him further into the house. "*Now wait a minute, you--*"

"Get lost," Jack interrupted. He quickened his pace, near-jogging down the hall. They reached a closed door at the end. Jack moved to open it.

"*Jack, I just-- I just want to know why you did it! I thought we were friends!*"

Jack stopped in his tracks, one hand on the doorknob. Slowly, he turned around. "You. . . thought we were *friends?*"

There was suddenly something profoundly *unsettling* about his posture. Tommy ignored the unease brewing in his chest, crossing his arms and assuming an expression of mulish confusion. “*Well, yeah. We were the Triple Ts, remember? You, me, Tubbo? And you were part of L’Manberg, once! I thought-- I didn’t think you’d, I dunno, kill me.*”

“Huh. Funny. I thought you wouldn’t kill me either.” Jack smiled, all teeth. “Then you shoved me into lava when I went to visit you in Exile. I burned to death. Wasn’t a fun way to go.”

He paused, clearly waiting for a response. Tommy could only stare at him, stunned into silence.

Jack cackled, saw-edged and sharp with fury. “You don’t even remember, do you?”

Tommy tried to speak, but his tongue had turned to lead in his mouth. His first instinct was to deny the accusation, but the jagged *rage* carved into every line of Jack’s posture spoke of nothing but truth. He-- he *didn’t* remember. The first few weeks of exile had blurred into a haze of rage and betrayal. There had been nightmares - so many nightmares - almost to the point where he couldn’t distinguish between dreams and reality. His memories of killing Jack had likely been lost in the fog.

Jack sneered at his silence. “Yeah. Thought so. Then at the Green Festival, you had the *fucking audacity* to complain about how *nobody visited you in exile.*” Something *otherworldly* burned beneath Jack’s skin, contorting the air around him with a miasma of *loathing*. “Oh boo-hoo, poor little Tommy all alone in exile-- *if only* he hadn’t *killed* the people who visited him!”

Tommy swallowed, tasting ash on his tongue. “. . . *I . . . I didn’t,*” he tried to protest, but it was a lie and they both knew it. Exile might have been a blur, but he remembered the events of the Green Festival in *excruciating* detail.

“I was in hell, you know,” Jack snarled. Sparks snapped between his teeth. “I *remember* being in hell. It was the worst fucking experience of my life, but you know what? *I dragged myself out.* I hated you *so fucking much* that my determination to *kill you* gave me the strength to *come back*. If you think we’re *friends*, you’re fucking deluded. Now get *out* of my house.”

Tommy didn’t move. Jack’s words cycled through his mind, tearing away at the bubble of denial he’d built. Here was undeniable proof that Jack *despised* him - and for good reason. If he’d really taken one of Jack’s lives when the man had been trying to help him--

“*Jack, I’m-- I’m sorry.*”

Jack’s ragged breathing hitched. He turned white, then red, then white again. When he spoke, his voice was trembling with barely-restrained fury.

“If this is some kind of *sick joke--*”

“*It’s not a joke, Jack! I’m sorry, I really am--*”

“You’re just apologizing now!” Jack snarled. “Just because I threw all that shit in your face--”

“ **I DIDN’T KNOW!** ” Tommy screamed, his echoing voice crackling with static. “*Jack, I swear I didn’t--*”

“HOW COULD YOU NOT KNOW THAT YOU KILLED SOMEONE?!”

“*Exile, it was--*” Tommy fumbled for words, unable to explain the *fog* he’d been in. “*--I couldn’t-- I was lost in my head, man, I didn’t--*”

Jack scoffed. “Right, so that makes it *okay*. ”

“*It doesn’t! Fuck-- I **know** it doesn’t, so stop putting words in my mouth! Jack, man, I fucked you over-- I admit that. I’m sorry. You didn’t-- you didn’t deserve any of that, and--*” Tommy took an unnecessary breath, trying to ground himself. “. . . *Fuck. I guess-- I’m just tryin’ to say I’m sorry. I know it’s not enough, but-- I am. You don’t have to accept my apology or shit, I’m just-- **fuck**, Jack, I’m so sorry. I’m sorry I killed you. I’m sorry I forgot. I’m sorry for betraying you, breaking your trust-- you didn’t deserve that.*”

Jack was silent. Tommy hesitantly lifted his gaze to his face, and was startled to see *tears* trickling down his cheeks.

“*Fuck,*” Jack hissed, pushing up his glasses to swipe at his eyes. “*Fuck. I just-- I just wanted someone to acknowledge me, or at least-- at least *apologize* for what they did.*”

“*I’m sorry,*” Tommy repeated. He knew it wasn’t enough, but he had to start somewhere. “*I’m so sorry, Jack. I-- what I did was wrong.*”

Jack snorted, low and watery. “No shit.”

They stood in that hallway, man and ghost, one trying furiously to scrub his tears away and the other hovering awkwardly at his shoulder. At long last, Jack sighed and looked up.

“*Fuck,*” he half-laughed, his shoulders slumping. “That’s all I ever wanted to hear from him. And now I get it from his fucking *ghost* instead. Because I killed him. *Fuck.*”

Tommy’s heart dropped into his stomach. “*I-- Jack, I **am** Tommy.*”

“You’re not. You’re some piss-poor replacement trapped here by ‘unfinished business’ or whatever.” Jack laughed. The sound rang hollow and flat. “Guess Tommy didn’t hate anyone enough to drag himself back to life.”

Hate, echoed Tommy’s mind. *Hate, hate, hate--*

“*I’m sorry,*” he tried one last time.

Jack shook. “I don’t need your apologies. He hurt me. I killed him. We’re even now, as far as it goes, and you can’t apologize when you’re not him.”

“Jack--”

Jack stepped into his room and shut the door in his face. Tommy stared at it in dazed silence for several long moments, then turned and drifted away.

54.

“No, that’s not-- that’s not--” His head ached. “I don’t understand. It’s not-- *why*? What’s happening? Everything’s *different*.”

There was no reply. There was no one around to hear him.

“I can’t,” he mumbled. “I have to know. . . what. . . what happened. Why-- it’s not a lie, it *can’t* be a lie.”

One foot in front of the other. He paced in a tight circle, eyes darting to the board hanging on the wall. “It doesn’t make sense. I don’t-- everything feels so *wrong*.” He paused, then removed a journal from his inventory and flipped it open. “The answers-- they have to be somewhere. Maybe I should try just--? No, I can’t trust them. I just need to keep searching. Something will turn up. Eventually.”

He turned and left the room.

[Loop Note: $\cap \perp \top \vdash \mathcal{J} \mathcal{J}!_i \equiv \mathcal{I} \cap \bar{\mathcal{K}} || \perp \equiv \mathcal{I} \mathcal{J}.$]

69.

The bell above the door rang as someone stepped into the diner. “Just a second!” Dream called. Moments later, he hurried out of the kitchen. “Oh, hey Connor.”

“Hey,” Connor greeted. He scanned the restaurant, taking in the shining tables, the plush chairs, and the sparkling black countertop. “Nice place you got here.”

“Thanks.” Dream tapped the cash register sitting on the counter. “So what can I get you?”

Connor squinted up at the menu hanging above the counter. “I’m broke. Seriously. The only thing I can afford is a cup of water.”

Dream shrugged. “On the house, then. We’ve had a slow day, I could use some good company.”

“I EXIST!” Tommy hollered from the kitchens.

“You don’t count as good company,” Dream called back. “Too annoying.”

“FUCK YOU!” Tommy shoved his way through the swinging kitchen doors. “I’LL SHOW YOU ANNOYING, YOU-- oh. Heyyy, Connor! Big man! Didn’t recognize your voice. How you doin’?”

Connor blinked. “Uh. . . hungry?”

“You’ve come to the right place,” Tommy declared, sweeping his arm in a grand arc and nearly hitting Dream in the throat. “Big T’s Burger Tower! So what can I get you?”

“It’s on the house,” Dream added. Tommy shot him a look, but Dream just shrugged. Tommy rolled his eyes.

“Okay, fine, yeah, it’s on the house.”

“Uh. Okay then. Could I have a . . . sparkling burger and fries?” Connor paused. “Why is everything on the menu labeled ‘sparkling’?”

“Sparkling burger and fries, coming right up! Dream, I have been chopping the potatoes for an hour straight. You do the fucking cooking.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Dream muttered, pulling an apron out from under the counter and trudging into the kitchen.

“No, seriously, why is everything labeled ‘sparkling’?” Connor looked worried. “Is it. . . is it like sparkling water? Are you guys pumping air into your burgers?”

Tommy wrinkled his nose. “Fuck no. You’ll see when you get your food. Go find a place to sit, I’ll join you after I get a soda.”

“Food’s done,” Dream declared, kicking the kitchen door open and slipping away from it before it could slam into him or the tray of food he was carrying. He strode up to the table and set the tray down in front of Connor, who stared at it. “Here you go. Enjoy.”

“Uh,” said Connor, poking his burger. There was glitter scattered through the bread and the meat. “Are you sure this is. . . edible?”

“It’s all edible glitter,” Dream assured, sliding into the seat next to Tommy. “It won’t kill you.”

“Uh-huh.” Connor eyed the burger dubiously, then picked up a fry. “And I’m. . . supposed to dip this in this cup.”

“Yep.”

“Which is full of edible glitter.”

“Yep.”

“What do you have against ketchup?”

Tommy shrugged. “Nothing, glitter’s just better.”

“If you say so,” Connor muttered, then stuck the fry in the red glitter and shoved it in his mouth. He chewed for a long, contemplative moment, swallowed, then looked up at the two restaurant owners. “This is disgusting.”

“It really is,” Dream agreed. “But at least we’re unique.”

“True.” Connor ate the next fry without bothering to dip it in the glitter. “So you put edible glitter in all your food?”

“Pretty much, yeah. That’s why all the stuff is called ‘sparkling’.” Dream leaned back into the chair. “As a sales pitch, it’s been pretty successful, but we’ve gotten some mixed results when it comes to actually eating the food.”

“Can’t imagine why,” Connor muttered.

Dream cleared his throat. “SO. What have you been up to? I haven’t seen you around the server lately.”

Connor picked up his burger and avoided eye contact. “I’ve been around. Doing stuff. Hanging out with some new friends, things like that.” He took a bite of the burger and promptly grimaced.

“You don’t have to keep eating it if you don’t want to,” Tommy said. Connor shook his head.

“Free food, can’t waste it,” he choked out. He took another brave bite of his burger, gagged, and promptly set his burger down. “Do you. . . have water?”

Tommy snorted and rose to his feet, disappearing back into the kitchens. He came back with a glass filled with ice water. “Here you go, big man.”

“Thanks,” Connor managed. He promptly began downing water as if his life depended on it.

“It can’t be that bad,” Dream muttered, narrowing his eyes at the culinary atrocity. Tommy snickered.

At last, Connor set his cup down. He wiped his mouth with the napkin, then leaned back into his seat and sighed. “Okay, yeah, I think I can afford to waste a bit. Thanks for the food, but I actually came here ‘cause I wanted to ask you about something.”

“Yeah?” Dream asked distractedly. He was still staring at the burger as if it had personally offended him.

“You’re in a time loop, aren’t you?”

Dream’s head snapped up at the same time that Tommy choked on his soda. Connor watched them, amused, as the teenager sputtered, beating his fist against his chest.

“What-- the *fuck*,” he wheezed between coughing fits. “I-- *how*.”

Connor grinned. “You’re not the first time traveller I’ve met. You guys give off the same. . . aura, vibe, I don’t know what to call it.” He paused and glanced around the restaurant.

“Though, uh, there’s also your sudden change in behavior.”

Tommy stiffened. “Wait, wait, back up for a second-- you’ve met another time traveller?”

“Yep. He’s not in a loop like you, though. He just moves back and forth.”

“Who?” Dream demanded. “Do we know him?”

Connor shrugged. “Maybe. He doesn’t know I know-- or maybe he does, I have no idea-- but I promised I wouldn’t tell. You guys gotta figure it out yourselves. Sorry.”

Tommy scowled. “What the fuck, man-- you can’t just-- tell us that and then brush it off!”

Connor shook his head. “Figure it out yourselves,” he repeated.

“Connor,” Dream said. “We’re in a time loop, yeah, but we don’t want to be here forever. This-- other time traveler you talked about-- if he could help us--”

“I can’t tell you,” Connor insisted. “I’m sorry, but I *can’t*. I know you guys’ll find him eventually--”

“We’re over a thousand loops in and we didn’t even *know* someone else was time travelling,” Tommy snarled. “Dammit, Connor, just fucking *tell* us. I’m not above trapping you in this shitty restaurant until we get an answer.”

Dream shot Tommy an alarmed look. “Tommy--”

“*No*. I’m not gonna waste five years looking for the dude when Connor *literally* has the answer. It’s not like he’ll remember anything we do this loop!”

There was a moment of tense silence. Connor shrank into his seat, suddenly appearing to realize exactly how much of a predicament he’d gotten himself into. Dream was watching Tommy warily, his hands half-raised as though he was ready to grab him.

“Too far?” Tommy asked quietly.

“Too far,” Dream confirmed. Tommy let out an explosive sigh and fell back into his chair, grimacing. He ran a hand through his hair, then looked up at Connor.

“Sorry, big C,” he muttered. “I didn’t mean that.”

Connor managed a nervous smile. “Yeah, uh. Okay. That’s okay. Um. I . . . I think-- I think I should probably go.”

“Alright,” Dream said. “Thanks for telling us about the other guy.”

Connor shrugged uncomfortably and stood. “No problem. Good luck figuring it out.” He glanced towards the door, then back at the two loopers. “And good luck with your restaurant.”

He hurried out of the diner, the bell over the door chiming cheerily as the door clicked shut behind him. Tommy and Dream sat in silence, the abandoned fries cooling on the table between them.

At last Tommy sighed, slumping forward and pressing his forehead against the table. “Fuck.”

Dream let out a humorless chuckle. “You can say that again.”

“*Fuck*,” Tommy repeated. He lifted his head and pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes. “Fuuuuuuuck. I did it again.”

“You caught yourself this time.” Dream folded his arms across his chest, turning his gaze to the window. “That’s better than me.”

“I’m not comparing myself to you, you bastard,” Tommy muttered. “I know this looping shit is messing with our morals, but *fuck*. I seriously considered *making* him tell us and-- Prime, this is so messed up.”

“I did too,” Dream confessed quietly. “But we didn’t, and we let him go. That. . . that counts for something.”

Tommy peered at him. “You don’t sound too sure about that, big man.”

“I’m not.”

“Encouraging.”

“Thanks, I try to be.”

They sat in companionable silence for a while, watching the sun set through the window. At last, Dream shifted. “. . . so who do you think the time traveller is?”

“Probably Ranboob,” Tommy grunted. “He’s such a main character, of fucking *course* he’d be time travelling.”

“We’ll go talk to him tomorrow morning, then,” Dream decided, rising to his feet. “I don’t think either of us feel. . . calm enough to hold a conversation with someone else tonight.”

Tommy, tellingly, didn't protest.

100.

“No, that’s not-- that’s not--” His head ached. “I don’t understand. It’s not-- *why*? What’s happening? Everything’s *different*.”

There was a loud thud behind him. He whipped around, startled, only to trip over carpet and bash his hip against the corner of his desk. “What--”

The intruder raised one hand, even as he tried to push himself off the floor. He was covered in ash and sported a bloody gash across the front of his chest. “Hi. Sorry. I’m the one that got you into this mess.”

“You’re hurt.”

The man choked out a wheezing, weak laugh, and hobbled over to sink down against a wall. “Yeah. Probably have ten minutes, fifteen if I stretch it. Do you-- *ugh* -- do you have a regen potion?”

A pause. “I, no, but-- wait, I can-- I can get you one. Um--”

“Then don’t worry about it. ‘M not gonna last for much longer anyways. Thank Prime you’re here though, there might still be a chance to f--” he shifted, then let out a pained gasp. “--f-fix it.”

“What. . . what happened?”

“Things. Bad things.” The intruder let out a labored wheeze. Blood dribbled down his chin. “I’ll give you the main points, grab something to write with. Th-there’s a lot you’ll have to do.”

[Loop Note: At least he got a proper funeral this time.]

Alphabet/Substitution Grid (5 x 5, left to right, top to bottom):

Keyword: FUNERAL/

140.

Karl shut the book and pushed it off his lap, watching as it flopped to the floor. It dissolved in a swirl of black magic before it touched the ground, reappearing on the shelf opposite him. *Inbetween & Other Side - Updated Theory #6* was the last piece he'd needed to

complete the puzzle. Whoever had written the book had been on the right track, but they'd disappeared before they could reach the conclusion.

So Karl finished it for them. He'd figured it out. He'd *finally* figured out what the Inbetween was.

It wasn't just a place. No, it was a *being*, a sentient, malicious entity split across multiple timelines that reached out to tempii who wandered too close and dragged them in. It bound them to a single path and twisted their abilities so they could move backwards and forwards along it - but not sideways. Tempii were not meant to move through time. They walked *across* paths, not on them.

Karl remembered his terror when he'd first tried to leave this world, only to find his powers on the fritz. The energy he used for timeline-hopping suddenly ran against him, tearing portals through the fabric and sending him backwards. When he was dumped back into 'present time', he'd passed out from the shock and remained bedridden for nearly a week, fading in and out of consciousness.

To make things worse, he'd been squished into a human form. Being human *sucked*. Even though his body was more durable than a normal human's, he was much shorter than what he was used to. He bled red. He was practically *blind*. Human senses were so limited.

(He missed colors so, so much.)

There was hope, though. One tempus had claimed that with time and a *lot* of travelling, they had wrangled their powers back under their own control. It wasn't enough to break the ties of the Inbetween, but they'd been able to hop outside of the Timeline - if only for a few moments. Their last journal entry had claimed that they would be trying to break the hated white strings, at which point they presumably either lost access to the Other Side or died. Either way, Karl was willing to take the risk - because the alternative was far worse.

The Inbetween was a parasite. It would consume memories, the lifeblood of the tempii, until they became nothing more than a husk, bound to wander through the Inbetween as empty shells until they wasted away. Karl could remember the corpses, dangling like marionettes from the tree. The white strings wrapped around their limbs remained eerily still, despite the breeze rustling the leaves around them. The illusions of the Inbetween had kept Karl from seeing them up until the very end, when he'd made the conscious choice to enter the Other Side.

Karl figured that the Other Side served as a sort of convergence point for the different versions of the Inbetween. The few tempii that managed to find it had used it as an archive, filling it with records of their own experiences to warn future tempii that found their way in. Karl himself had already left several volumes of notes on what he'd observed.

And now he needed to write his theory. Hopefully, the next tempus trapped here would find it useful.

Shaking out his hands, he crawled to his feet and staggered over to the chest against the wall and pried it open. After retrieving a blank journal and a pen, he sat back and

scrawled ***Inbetween & Other Side - Updated Theory #7*** on the cover. After a considering pause, he flipped the front cover open and added, *if you discover anything new, create a new book.*

Taking a deep breath, Karl shook his pen and began to write.

When he shut the book, his hand was aching. He slid the book onto the shelf, right beside ***Inbetween & Other Side - Updated Theory #6***, then pulled an extra copy of his updated version of the theory - this one titled ***Inbetween & Other Side - √∧∧∧'s Theory*** - and ***Journal #31*** from his inventory. Plodding through the long rows of shelves, he stopped beside his current slot and stuffed the two books into their place at the end. They glowed briefly, signifying that the archives had recognized and cataloged them. Karl stared at them for a long moment, then turned on his heel and trudged away.

Time to go home. Time to do it all over again.

He exited the library, shivering as fog swirled around him and sank into his skin. The lack of visibility hardly deterred him - he was long used to navigating the Other Side by now, and while he couldn't walk through it with his eyes closed, he *could* do it with five feet of vision. So he followed the familiar paths, the soles of his sneakers cracking against slick marble. A right turn, another right, then straight ahead and up the stairs to the portal.

He reached the top of the steps and froze in his tracks.

The portal was empty. There was no swirling purple and green, only an obsidian portal frame.

He stared at it, something cold sinking in his chest. "No," he whispered. He reached out and touched the portal frame, then gripped it, running his hands over the inside of the portal, *praying* for it to relight. "No, no, no, *no--*"

Something flashed in the corner of his eye. He whipped around to see a tulip, sitting innocently in a pot. Deja vu washed over him, memories of a time when something similar had happened in another place. In the Inbetween.

The invisible strings around his wrists seemed to tighten. He scratched at them, trying not to hyperventilate. He was supposed to be safe here. He *thought* he would be safe here.

When he blinked, a trail of yellow tulips had appeared. "I'm not following you," he choked out.

The Other Side rumbled apologetically, but the portal did not relight. Karl stood his ground, hands fisted in his hoodie.

"I'm not following you," he repeated. "I want to go home. Let me go home."

More tulips sprang up, wriggling through the cracks between the stones. It was a statement. Either he could wait here, trapped in permanent stasis, or he could follow the Other Side and see what it wanted.

Karl let himself hesitate for ten seconds more. And then he followed.

The tulips led him along a path he'd traversed before, around corners and through corridors. He was moving towards a separate library he'd only been in once or twice; this building housed records of the first tempii who'd found their way here. Half of them weren't in any language Karl understood, and the remaining half were mostly filled with observations he'd already made, so he didn't come here often.

The trail of tulips didn't lead him into the archives, though. Rather, they ended at a dead-end wall. He crouched down next to the last one, plucking it from the pot. "What do you want?" he whispered, twirling it between his fingers. "What do you want to show me?"

The building trembled around him. The lantern light glinted off an uneven tile in the floor. Karl squinted, realizing that it was a trigger of some kind.

"You want me to press it?"

The wind hummed an affirmative through the arches. Karl reached out and pressed the tile, watching it sink down. The wall before him rumbled, sliding back to reveal a section of the library that he'd never seen before.

"What. . ." he croaked, rising to his feet. The room was pitch-dark, save for the bubble of light spilling in from the lanterns behind him. Hesitantly, he pulled one off the wall and held it high, revealing rows and rows of bookshelves. They seemed endless, retreating into the darkness.

He moved closer, raising the lantern to the first row of books. They were the same color as his own journals, words scrawled along the brown covers in black ink.

Journal #1. Journal #2. Journal #3. Journal #4. Journal #5.

A chill crawled down his spine. He ran the lantern across the shelf, pacing down the row until he reached the end.

There. Right after ***Journal #42***, the last book was ***Inbetween & Other Side - ʃʌʀʃ's Theory***.

He raised the lantern a bit higher. The row above the one he had been examining was filled with the exact same books, except ***Inbetween & Other Side - ʃʌʀʃ's Theory*** was sandwiched between ***Journal #36*** and ***Journal #37***.

He raised the lantern higher, revealing an empty shelf. He moved back to the left. This row ended at ***Journal #12***.

The next row. He moved along until he found ***Journal #95***, then circled around and headed deeper into the gloom. The lantern splashed light across shelves as he passed. He picked a random aisle and slid in, whipping the lantern up to read the spines.

More Journals. More copies of books he had written already.

And with them, more copies of books he *hadn't* written. He'd only traveled thirty-one times - he was *sure* of it. His latest journal had been ***Journal #31***. He wanted to believe that ***Journal #95*** and ***Journal #42*** and all the other books had been written by some other tempus, a long, long, time ago, but--

--but every single one of the books in this library was labeled in familiar handwriting. *His* handwriting.

“What the *honk* is this?”

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